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Dandy Don, the Denver Detective.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.



"THIS IS THE FOURTH MAN WE HAVE FOUND MURDERED. WHO IS MARKED TO GO NEXT?"

Dandy Don,

THE DENVER DETECTIVE;

OR,

THE MASKED FARO QUEEN.

Romance of the Chloride City Death
Riddle.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

THE DANDY AND THE TOUGH.

"Not so mighty much for looks, stranger," with a comprehensive flourish of the whip which included the mining-town and its immediate surroundings, "but what ye see ye do see!"

"And that's Chloride, is it, driver?"

"That's Chloride City, you kin wager your saccharine existence," asseverated he of the box-seat, with a half-humorous twinkle of his near eye as he safely discharged that mouthful. "Not so wild and woolly as she used to was, mebbe, when she was a healthy young kid in knee-skairts an' don't-give-a-durn-ef-I-do; but the he-ole fun is *right thar*, fer a'll, jest so ye scratch deep enough to git further in then the varnish. An'—I say, boss?"

"What is it, driver?"

Billy Delancey cast a half-shy glance back along his side of the coach, then lowered his tones as though afraid of being heard by less friendly ears, then added swiftly:

"Mebbe I'm a fool for my trouble, but things is a-bitin' me jest about like this: Know Pike Hunter?"

"Never heard of him or it to my knowledge. Why?"

"It's a *him*, an' 'tain't a hymn o' peace, nuther," with another of his humorous twinkles. "Got aboard at Blizzard Bend, back yender, an' ef he hain't been gnawin' his sorest paw ever sence't, then I don't want a copper!"

"One of the bad men from Bitter Creek, is it?" asked the dandified pilgrim, with a faint arching of his dark brows.

"That's what! An' Pike hain't growed no sweeter into the temper of him, all this lone, some ways. An' why? Beca'se *he* hed to go inside, or take deck passidge onto the ruff!"

Don Darling looked the faint surprise he was feeling, and that answered the purpose of words, since Delancey added in those same guarded tones:

"Course it's jest a habit, like, stranger, but fer a fact Pike Hunter makes out like he had a fu'st morgidge onto the seat *you've* kept warm, an' so—Waal, hyar we be! An' ef Pike don't kick up a nasty bit of a row over it all, then I've been chawin' wind all fer nothin'!"

Driver Delancey hurried his words faster than ever in order to complete his friendly warning, for by this time the stage was fairly inside the limits of Chloride City, and a dashing swing of the double-span carried the dusty old coach into the fairly broad thoroughfare which was bordered on either side by the main buildings of the place.

Something like a frown came into the face of the stranger, who was for the first time gazing upon the more or less celebrated mining-town, for he was by no means anxious to celebrate that event by sharing in a street squabble, even with so noted an individual as this Pike Hunter appeared to be.

Letting his memory revert to the euphoniously named town which the stage had last left, Don Darling dimly recalled a tall, roughly-clad individual who had gruffly growled in answer to the driver's cheery salutation before plunging into those dusty depths.

Was *that* the typical "bad man" of Chloride City? If so, why hadn't he entered his claim to the seat beside the driver?

"I'd have yielded, meekly enough," ran Darling's thoughts, though his handsome face betrayed naught of the uneasiness he was actually feeling. "Why not? A row—ugh!"

The dandified-looking passenger gave a little shiver of disgust at the bare thought, gripping the iron railing as the stage gave a

sudden jolt and swinging sway as a wheel on his side struck a sizable stone, the four horses now laying down in a swift trot as they beheld their immediate destination before them.

Seemingly giving no further thought to the stranger whom he had kindly, if rather tardily, warned of breakers ahead, Billy Delancey brought his team up in front of the usual halting place. "The Grand," a fairly imposing building which appeared to be the principal hotel of Chloride City.

Here the usual number of sight-seers had gathered in anticipation of his arrival, rather than through any ardent expectations of receiving any particularly important mail matter; and as the dust followed stage rattled up to a halt, the perfunctory cheer was given the turn-out as a whole, with a good-humored quip or two for Billy Delancey in particular.

This was nothing beyond what Don Darling had witnessed at each halt since leaving the steel trail for the stage line, but the novelty of such primitive customs had not yet worn off, and for the moment he forgot that annoying hint let fall by the driver; but only to have it rudely brought back to mind almost before the dusty coach had ceased swaying after that adroitly managed halting.

The side door was flung open before that halt was fairly completed, and through that opening plunged a tall, gaunt shape, clad in flannel shirt, copper-riveted overalls and coarse, heavy knee-boots.

An unkempt mass of sandy hair was topped by a grease-spotted white-felt hat, below the dirty brim of which gleamed two small, vicious-seeming eyes, now turned toward the box-seat where Don Darling still maintained his position, an innocent smile upon his really handsome face.

Flattening that slouch brim with an open-handed slap, fairly exposing his freckled face to the rays of the declining sun, then resting bony hands upon the cartridge-studded belt which encircled his middle, Pike Hunter gave vent to a shrill, peculiar squeal such as must have come from an enraged stallion in duress.

This warlike sound brought all eyes his way, and having carried his first point, the freckled desperado gave an additional snort, nodding his head toward the dandified stranger, then burst forth with:

"Circus a-comin', gents, an' right thar ye kin hev a free glimpse of the ring-tailed monkey! Jest a scabby sample o' the turrible wonders which ye'll gawp at when the hull menadgery comes to town! An' ef *this* yer' dose don't kill ye off too *mortal* fast, the rest o' the grand show'll do ye all proud in jue time!"

Pike Hunter seemed determined that no doubt should linger as to his full meaning, for his sinewy left hand gave an appropriate flourish as accompaniment, then a bony finger pointed directly at the startled passenger.

Unless that handsome face bore false witness, Don Darling was taken completely aback by this sudden address, and he by no means helped the situation any by his instinctive action; placing a monocle in place as he gazed perplexedly around, seemingly unable to locate the animal mentioned by the desperado.

"Ring-tailed an' glass-eyed!" immediately improved Pike Hunter. "One o' the mammy-boy monkeys which chaws gum an' sucks a warm milk-bottle! Jest a free sample sent in ahead o' the main show, and the loss wouldn't come to nothin' ef the frost *did* nip it in the tender green!"

"High-yah! This way, gents! Free show, but it's gwine a-glimmerin' in a holy minnit ef ye don't git a hustle on! Totes its hole in a pill-box, an' gittin ready fer to crawl inside—*look* at the pore critter shake an' shiver 'long o' hearin' a *man* blaah!"

The brawny desperado burst into a loud, insulting laugh, which had a goodly number of echoes from the more or less amused gathering near the stage.

Don Darling himself forced a rather sickly smile, but Billy Delancey frowned as an elbow gave his passenger a warning poke, muttering:

"Better 'light, stranger, fer I'm gwine on to the stables."

"I don't—*does* he really mean—*me*?" fal-

tered Darling, giving what seemed to be a nervous start, then staring half-vacantly through his monocle at those grinning faces.

"Hyar's yer step-ladder for to climb down, monkey-baby!" coarsely called forth the tough, little eyes fairly aglow with malice as he moved a step or two nearer, reaching out a freckled paw as though to clutch the stranger by an ankle.

Instead, however, the dandy evaded that evil aid, springing lightly from box-seat to ground, the jar of alighting robbing his eye of that gold-rimmed ornament, and slightly displacing the silk hat which he wore.

"Gook joke—really witty, don't ye know, gentlemen," he declared, smiling blandly as he settled the glossy tile more firmly in place with a neatly kidded hand.

A figure familiar enough along the city pave, but certainly out of place in even a latter-day mining-town such as Chloride City prided herself on being.

A figure which would have given even a fashionable tailor a bosom-glow of pride and satisfaction, so perfectly was it appointed, from silk tile to patent-leather shoes.

Yet there was something more, something better than a mere dandy or tailor-dummy in this gentleman from Denver, despite that half-simpering smile and nervous twirling of his gracefully curling brown mustache; but that something was of too fine a metal for Pike Hunter to fairly recognize, and so he recklessly pursued his evil fancy further.

"Wuss then a joke ef the shower ketches ye, lads!" the tough fairly howled, then grasped his sun-burnt nose with a snort of supreme disgust. "Grinnin' monkey, fast enough, but crossed with skunk, or whar's that he-ole smell comin' from? Talk about yer menadgery! Why—"

"*This* is a modern three-ring circus, gentlemen, as you can judge for yourselves," chipped in the Dandy from Denver, smiling and bowing as he added the appropriate gestures with kidded hands. "Merely the *avant couriers*, but what better can you ask?"

"Yonder the band-wagon," indicating the dusty stage, now getting under headway once more. "Here the ringmaster, very much at your service, and *yonder*," with an additional bow toward the freckled rough in order to leave no room for doubting his meaning, "the yellow dog I've engaged to do my barking for me!"

The point was none too delicate, but was all the better appreciated by that gathering, and instantly the laugh was turned against Pike Hunter, whose wits, none too keen under the most favorable circumstances, and now materially dulled by over indulgence in bad whisky, only sluggishly groped toward the truth.

"Ef you mean—What *do* ye mean, cuss ye, critter?" he growlingly demanded, lifting a menacing fist as he leaned a bit forward, glaring at that neatly-garbed, pleasantly-smiling stranger.

"To call it quits, if you're willing, Mr. Hunter," declared Don Darling, frankly, likewise extending a hand, but with fingers open. "Surely the white winged angel of peace—"

"White-winged thunder!"

"Thunder goes, if you really like the sound better, my dear sir," still with that cheery smile in sight. "Anything to keep peace in the family, is the motto I've hoisted to my—*What!*"

The smile was gone now, and the Dandy from Denver started back with a sharp ejaculation on his lips, but too late to wholly escape the insult aimed at him by this red-shirted ruffian of the mines.

A jet of tobacco-juice shot through those bearded lips, and true to its aim, thoroughly befouled one of those shining patent-leathers.

There could be no mistaking the fellow's purpose: insult showed from each and every line of his now thoroughly evil countenance.

Slight and whimsical though his excuse for hating this dandified passenger may seem, still it was quite sufficient in his own mind to fully justify both insult and the probable consequences.

"Jest *that*, ye smellin'-monkey!" coarsely cried Hunter, plainly attributing that instinctive recoil to physical fear. "When a glass-eyed dude comes prancin' 'crost my stampin'-grounds like a—*ugh!* 'Thar's

too mighty much o' ye top an' bottom, an' not nigh 'nough heft in the middle to keep all from sp'illin'."

"Did you really intend— Sir, am I to consider this a deliberate insult?"

From boot to ruffian glanced the brown eyes, that handsome face turning very pale as its owner forced himself to ask that question.

More than one of those present saw trouble coming, but Pike Hunter could hardly be said to form one of that number.

Anger or resentment with him had but one method of expression, and those low, even tremulous tones formed its very opposite.

"Insult? *You?*" loudly exploded the ruffian, then bursting into a horse-laugh as he spat a huge quid into his curving fingers. "Hunt yer hole, critter! I've daubed yer underpinnin', an' now—shoot that hat!"

His right hand swung up and forward, hurling that wet mass of tobacco straight at that glossy tile with a purpose which could not be misunderstood; but there was sufficient warning in his words and movements for Don Darling to guard himself now.

Yet the range was so short it necessitated a violent jerk of the head to elude that disgusting missile, and the effort dislodged the silken tile, sending it rolling in the dust of the street.

With a howl of vicious exultation, Pike Hunter sprang toward the fallen property, yet even then clumsily disguising his real purpose by crying out:

"Hyar's yer hat, mister! But—*ugh!*"

The fellow dropped on all-fours in his seeming haste to secure the fugitive tile, but one heavy hand fell squarely upon the hat, crushing it to a shapeless mass, even as Don Darling sprang forward to make a swift, dexterous motion with his befouled shoe.

The patent-leather crossed that hairy face, leaving a band of dust and moisture marking the beard of which Pike Hunter was so proud; then the man from Denver sprang back, smiling lightly like one who feels the balance is not entirely against him.

The desperado scrambled to his feet, left hand sweeping down his long beard, while a savage howl burst from his lungs as he realized the humiliating truth.

"Cuss ye, I'll rip yer heart out fer that!" he cried, jerking forth a long-bladed knife, giving it a ferocious flourish as he leaped for the throat of his smiling adversary.

Knowing retreat to be well-nigh impossible, Don Darling struck out straight from the shoulder, but at the same instant Pike Hunter flung up his arms, staggering back, to fall limply as a dead man!

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS KILLING.

WITH very few exceptions, the crowd believed Pike Hunter went down because of that swiftly-aimed blow, but a few others besides Don Darling were so situated as to feel confident the desperado staggered back even before those kidded knuckles fairly touched that face.

The man from Denver gave a startled ejaculation at this totally unexpected movement, and stepping quickly to one side in order to foil any cunning snare, he stood on guard, ready for the rally which must surely follow at once.

Instead—Pike Hunter lay precisely as he had fallen, his only movement consisting of a faint, barely perceptible shivering which lasted barely half a score seconds.

"Knocked out in the fu'st round!" cried one taunting voice from out the gathering, while another added the explosive warning:

"Squawmble up, Pike! Glass-eye's comin' fer yer pelt, red-hot!"

The hot flush of anger was fading from Darling's face, for something in this unnatural quiet under such circumstances warned him of still worse to come.

Why did Pike Hunter make no effort to regain his feet? Why had he fallen so suddenly, so limply, even before that blow could fairly reach his face?

Why did he—ugh! 'Twas just like a corpse!

A hush fell upon that assembly, and for a few seconds no one seemed willing or able to either speak or to move; then a man bent over the fallen desperado, giving a hasty ex-

amination, to start back with still paler face, and the words:

"Dead—killed too dead for skinning, gents!"

A chorus of startled cries broke from the crowd, and distinct above other voices came that of the dandified stranger:

"Impossible! It can't be true!"

"Pike's dead, and—*who's to blame?*" added the pale-faced friend. "*Who killed him, then?*"

Half-frightened, half-angry eyes turned toward the stranger, and knowing how little it takes at such times to set a mob into motion, Don Darling quickly cried out in self-defense:

"Not *me*, gentlemen! I call you all to witness that he deliberately picked a quarrel, and that his insults were repeated before I even attempted to resent them."

"*He's dead: Who killed him?*" almost monotonously repeated the man, who had made that brief examination of the prostrate desperado.

"Whoever or whatever did, 'twas not I," earnestly repeated the other. "I struck but once, and that wasn't hard enough to hurt a fly!"

"*He hain't no fly,*" slowly persisted the accuser, pointing toward the motionless shape. "*You hit out, an' thar he lays! Ef that didn't do the job, what did? Ef you hain't to blame fer his death, whar kin we putt that blame? Say?*"

The fiercest of accusations would have been easy to meet, compared with this calm, dull, even listless charge; and with face growing still more pale, the endangered stranger shrunk visibly, turning half around as though meditating actual flight.

Right or wrong, this was the interpretation placed upon his action by at least one of that gathering, for a stern voice rung forth with the warning:

"Block the way, there! Don't let him run off! It's another secret killing, and—*down him, boys!*"

Then it was that the supposed dandy dude showed the metal of which he was composed, for, ere a single hand could close upon his person in obedience to that startled and startling call, he swept half a dozen lusty fellows away from his front, then backed to the broad steps leading up to the hotel front, each gloved hand holding a revolver-butt, while over those polished tubes of possible death came the sharp challenge:

"Back, gentlemen! I'm ready to stand anything like a fair trial, but no mob law! Back, I say!"

"Don't let him got away, friends!" sharply added that voice belonging to Jerome Felton, a well-known citizen. "If not bloody murder, what else can you call it?"

"A lie, if you try to fasten such a crime upon me, sir!" sternly retorted the stranger, moving the muzzles of his weapons back and forth in order to command all of that excited gathering if possible. "Keep back, I warn you, one and all! I'll stand fair trial, but I'll kill the man who dares lift hand against me before that square deal is guaranteed!"

Jerome Felton said no more, and none of the others then present seemed better prepared for speech. As for action—well, even a dandy dude at bay is no trifle to face down, especially when nothing save apparel distinguishes that dandy dude from the veriest fire eater!

It looked like a deadlock just then, for if the crowd showed no immediate intention of downing the accused, it just as surely was out of his power to seek safety in actual flight.

This truce could hardly last long, at the very best, and when it was broken—well, there could be but *one* ending, as no man better knew than Don Darling himself.

Still, his only symptom of fear or of uneasiness as to the final outcome lay in his unusually pale visage, and that was caused more by this inexplicable happening than purely personal apprehension.

What had caused the death of this ruffian? For—surely he was no longer living? Unless death was present, why that horrible inertness? Why did he not give some sign, make some movement?

And yet—how could it be death?

As Don Darling had so hurriedly declared, his well meant blow really would hardly have injured a fly, for Pike Hunter had flung

up his hands and was falling back before that fist could reach his face. A mere touch: nothing more than that!

But, Pike Hunter was a dead man!

Before any one of that gathering could decide to break the dead-lock by taking decisive action, a clear, strong voice rung forth:

"What appears to be the trouble here, gentlemen?"

The owner of that voice pushed his way toward the nearly cleared space about which the interested crowd had gathered in a semi-circle, the hotel steps and long piazza forming a cord to the arc.

Seemingly every one present save Don Darling recognized that voice, and passage was hurriedly made for the owner, even before a glance was turned his way, so great was his moral influence.

"It's murder, no less!" sternly exclaimed Jerome Felton in response.

"What! You surely can't mean that!"

"Look for yourself, Eldridge," with a swift gesture toward that motionless shape lying in the dust. "When you hear—"

"Hunter! Surely not—who killed him, then?"

From incredulous amazement to stern anger shifted that voice, and Ransom Eldridge turned to flash a keen, almost burning glance over the figure of the Dandy from Denver, whose attitude plainly proclaimed him a prominent factor in this mysterious killing.

"There he stands, and—"

"I'm as innocent as you are yourself, sir!" sharply interrupted Don Darling, but still standing on guard. "I was publicly insulted by yonder person, but the man lies who says I harmed him, much less took his life!"

Ransom Eldridge gazed into that pale but handsome visage for a few seconds, then turned his eyes across the street, as though guided by instinct, for he promptly called forth:

"This way, doctor! Make haste, and—room, gentlemen, if you please! Of course we're after the bottom facts, but there's a wrong as well as a right way of getting at even the naked truth."

The physician, a portly, massively-built man of middle-age, nodded briefly in recognition, then, catching sight of the motionless figure on the ground, cleared his throat sonorously.

"Ah! Hum! A case of—accident?"

"That's for your skill to decide, doctor," gravely said Eldridge. "Call for such assistance as you may need, please. And now—"

Paying not the slightest heed to those leveled pistols, Ransom Eldridge turned toward Don Darling once more, moving closer to the stranger in spite of the fact that one of those menacing muzzles already covered his person.

"Take care, you sir!"

"The same to you, sir," coldly retorted the larger man; for Ransom Eldridge was a man of weight in more than one sense.

"Put up your guns, my good friend."

"Pray, who may you be, then?"

"My name is Eldridge. I am mayor of Chloride City. I say it again, as one gentleman to another; put up your guns!"

A plump, white, strong hand pushed that menacing muzzle aside, the action betraying not the faintest shadow of doubt or of fear. Yet, too, Ransom Eldridge was not acting blindly, for his knuckles did that shifting, the position of his hand being such that it would be impossible for him to grasp the weapon.

At the same time it told the stranger he was bent only on peace.

Passing the weapon, that plump hand dropped lightly to an arm, its pressure seeming actually friendly as the voice came again:

"As mayor of this town, then—"

"Good!" swiftly interjected the other, his armed hands lowering as though he felt himself free from peril after all. "Then you can vouch for me, as I am—"

His lips came closer to an ear, to add the rest in a whisper, but Ransom Eldridge showed scanty emotion at the tidings, although a faint smile did show for an instant about his firm lips before the calm, grave words found utterance:

"Very well, Mr. Darling. You shall have a fair show, and no honest man can ask for more than that!"

Meanwhile, the doctor had been busied making an examination of the stricken desperado, but now he lifted his head, casting a glance toward the spot where the mayor was standing.

"What's the good word, Brewster?" quickly asked Eldridge, without waiting for further invitation.

"There is no good word, properly speaking, sir, but—Hunter is a corpse!" in answer to that impatient gesture.

"Impossible! I never—" impulsively began the man from Denver, but breaking off as that hand gripped an arm warningly.

"If poor Hunter is indeed a corpse, his death could hardly have come about through purely natural causes. Then—*what killed him, doctor?*"

There was a brief silence, during which the physician stared gravely down upon the body; but then he uttered, slowly:

"As to that, sir, I would not like to say, positively, without making a more careful and thorough examination."

"How long will it take to fairly make up your mind, Dr. Brewster?"

"That depends, sir, of course; but—"

"Very well, doctor," with another peremptory wave of a hand. "Time is yours, and we'll wait until your decision is ready for utterance. Be so kind as to fall to work at once, will you?"

The physician bowed just a thought stiffly, but as he again bent over the dead man, the mayor seemed content to let that point work itself out as best it might without further help from himself.

Up to this moment almost perfect silence had reigned throughout that gathering, now an assembly of quite imposing dimensions as tidings of another tragedy took to itself wings and spread over the town as by magic; but now an ugly muttering sound came from a portion of the mass, while here and there a word was let fall which boded ill for the stranger whose advent had been so terribly marked.

Eldridge calmly faced that mass, his tones smooth and even as ever in all his life, although no man knew better than he how surely, how swiftly, how easily such a mob could crush his life out in case the murderous whim should fairly take possession of them all.

"No time like the present, friends and fellow-citizens," he said, in his blandest tones.

"As you one and all know, Pike Hunter was my friend and partner in life. In death—if this really prove to be death—he is still more dear to me as man and brother."

"Yet you're shielding the fellow who killed him!"

"Only from mob law, not from simple justice, Felton," gravely answered the mayor. "If he is proved guilty of murder, then I will be the last man on earth to stand in the light of law and justice. But—"

Dr. Brewster just then turned from the corpse, gravely saying:

"I must beg of you to let the body be moved from here, Mr. Eldridge. Say to a room in the Grand here."

"For further examination, of course, doctor."

"For more careful examination, precisely," gravely bowed Brewster. "Give me half an hour by myself, and I'll tell you what killed Mr. Hunter."

"You shall have the time, sir," came the instant response.

CHAPTER III.

WHO KILLED PIKE HUNTER?

SPEAKING like one who was well accustomed to being obeyed without question or argument, Ransom Eldridge bade some of those present lift the body between them and bear it into the hotel, naming Jerome Felton among others.

"It's the simple truth we're after, first of all, doctor, and it's to you we have to look for the first link of that," he added, gravely, as the men summoned gathered about the corpse. "Unless poor Hunter came to his end by purely natural causes—"

"You shall know the whole truth as to that, sir."

"Thanks, doctor. Call aid if you require any such, and send or bring me word as soon as the result is past doubting."

"Where will I find you, then?"

"Under the same roof. This gentleman—you will keep me company, sir?" turning toward the latest arrival by stage.

That question seemed little more than a mere matter of form, since the mayor slipped one white hand through Don Darling's arm as he spoke, facing him about to ascend those broad, shallow steps leading to the hotel entrance.

No actual opposition was made, either to the body being removed or to this more leisurely movement; but a surly, ugly muttering made itself audible just then, and Mayor Eldridge deemed it worthy his notice.

Facing about, hand still in charge of the supposed slayer, he spoke in earnest accents:

"You have seen and heard everything so far, gentlemen, and you shall not be cheated out of the denouement, let that pan out as it may. Doctor Brewster says he requires privacy in order to exactly determine the cause, or method, by which poor Hunter came to his death."

"Tain't Doc, but this yer' monkey-dude!" called forth a coarse voice, with a plagiarism from the desperado so strangely laid low.

"If by that you mean Mr. Darling, he is in my charge, and I hold myself personally responsible for his appearance when and wherever needed," coldly cut in the mayor. "We are going inside the hotel, there to await the decision given by Doctor Brewster. You can wait out here until his report is ready, then 'twill be given you, as well."

As though there could be no room for questioning his decision when once delivered, Mayor Eldridge passed up the steps, crossed the broad porch, entered the building, acting both as guide and guardian to the now hatless Dandy from Denver.

Not a hand was raised to prevent this, and hardly a call or a word could be heard in opposition to the will of the mayor.

It was a strong testimonial to his influence as chief of the city!

Passing along a bare, cheerless entry, the stranger gave a little shiver as he caught a glimpse of a grimly burdened table in the big dining-room, but neither Darling nor Eldridge seemed anxious for more than a passing glimpse, and they passed on to the dingy little "parlor" which lay nearer the rear of the barn-like building.

Once seated in here, Mayor Eldridge questioned his charge concerning the affair, scanning the troubled face before him as Don Darling told of the part he had been forced to play in that unfortunate affray.

"There's only one explanation I can give," the stranger from Chloride City added, with a troubled frown. "The fellow must have had heart disease, for he was falling before I struck out at him! Why, my dear sir, 'pon honor, my glove barely touched his face!"

"No doubt you firmly believe all that, too, yet a man grows excited and hits much harder than—Hark!"

Eldridge cut his speech short as the sound of hurried footfalls came to their waiting ears, and as the two men instinctively rose from their chairs, the door was pushed open, a head was thrust in, for its owner to rapidly splutter:

"Doc wants you, boss! He's found out what killed Pike Hunter!"

"I'm going with you, sir," decided Darling, half-doggedly.

"Perhaps you'd better," assented the mayor, but with a slight twitching of his smoothly-shaven upper lip.

Together they passed from the room, along the corridor, then entering the door of the dining-room, where Jerome Felton was on guard duty.

The dead man lay upon one of the long tables, but grim and ghastly as that spectacle undoubtedly was, neither pair of eyes gave it more than a passing glance, just then.

Dr. Brewster was standing beside the corpse, one big hand resting lightly upon its breast, the other closed save as to thumb and forefinger, between which was held some small object.

"You bade me find out what killed Pike Hunter, Eldridge, and I've done just that,

sir!" was his salutation, professional reserve and dignity proving insufficient to wholly mask his triumph.

"Name it, then!"

"A bullet, from rifle or pistol!"

As he spoke, the doctor held up his right hand, the bit of lead showing with fair distinctness there in the room; but neither Eldridge nor Darling seemed able to at once believe his testimony.

"Shot? You can't mean it, Brewster!"

"I never heard—*was* there a shot, though?"

"But I most distinctly *do* mean it, your honor!" declared the physician, his heavy brows gathering and a flush of professional irritation coming to his massive cheeks. "I say it once more: Pike Hunter was killed by a gunshot wound, and here you see the bullet which I found and extracted from the wound."

"I can bear him out so much, Eldridge," gravely spoke up Jerome Felton, coming forward from his station near the hall door. "I saw him cut it out, myself!"

"You can follow the track of the bullet for yourself, sir, if you see fit to take the trouble," brusquely declared the doctor, turning to the corpse and utilizing the sandy beard for parting those jaws. "It entered right here—there is the little cut in the tongue—closer, sir, if you wish to judge for yourself!"

Seemingly losing all thought of the man who stood charged with that mysterious killing, Eldridge obeyed, bending over the dead man and following the physician as, with hands and tongue, he illustrated the facts which investigation had brought to light.

"I first noticed the tinge of blood which marked the subject's lips, you understand? And that showed me the slight laceration of the tongue. Neither seemed a very important clue, as you must admit, but lacking any more definite data, I—ahem!"

The mayor gave an impatient gesture which Dr. Brewster was swift to interpret as intended, and after a brief cough, he spoke with greater directness.

Having secured the privilege of elbow-room, he lost no time in following up that faint clue, which resulted in the discovery of a bullet resting only a little ways beneath the skin at the back of Pike Hunter's neck!

"Then it was easy enough to connect the two ends, sir," concluded the physician, wiping the flexible probe which had been lying upon that red-shirted breast. "The man was shot from in front. The bullet entered his mouth, without cutting or abrading either lip, then passed through his neck, cutting the spinal marrow very near the base of the brain!"

Don Darling had forced himself to keep silence through all this, but now he burst in earnest speech, saying:

"The whole crowd can bear witness that I had no gun in my hand until after this poor fellow fell to earth! And even his fiercest partisan will not dare say I fired a shot, then or later on!"

There was silence in the room, but not so outside. Beyond a doubt the messenger who had brought word to Mayor Eldridge of the doctor's discovery, had taken the tidings elsewhere, for just then the excited roar of many sturdy voices broke forth, demanding the report promised them by the official head of Chloride City.

"We'd better all go, I fancy," gravely said Eldridge, once more taking the lead when prompt decision was called for. "Guard that bullet, please, doctor, for it may prove a link to connect neck with noose!"

It was by no means a cheerful prospect, facing yonder howling, yelling mob, but Don Darling made no resistance when Mayor Eldridge led him toward the front of the hotel, nor did he flinch when his appearance was greeted by still fiercer cries from that excited assembly.

The mayor held up a hand to command peace, and almost instant silence followed. Then he stated that Dr. Brewster had completed his examination of the corpse, and stood ready to make his report.

In obedience to a bow and partial withdrawal, the physician stepped more prominently to the front, giving a clear, non-technical report, and leaving no room for doubt-

ing the cause of Pike Hunter's death, unless his report was taken to be an audacious fabrication.

"Did my blow have anything to do with that death, Dr. Brewster?" the stranger from Denver asked, calmly.

"It did not!" came the positive assertion.

"Then—I leave it to yourselves, gentlemen!" now appealing directly to the crowd. "You were near enough to see and to hear everything that took place between us. Did I draw a weapon or fire a shot before Pike Hunter fell back, dead?"

"If he *was* shot, and you didn't do it, *who did?*" demanded a voice.

"Who shot Owen Yarwood?" cried Mayor Eldridge, striding to the front once more, his strong features showing poorly suppressed excitement, his large brown eyes fairly glowing from the same cause as they glanced swiftly over those faces assembled on the level below. "Who killed Michael Mahoney?"

Instant silence fell over the crowd, and those nearest the steps recoiled a bit, as from some infernal machine. Flushed faces turned pale and sturdy figures cowered during those few seconds of silence.

Ransom Eldridge recovered something of his customary composure, and making no attempt to answer his own questions, he moved closer to the side of the stranger whose entrance into Chloride City had been so mysteriously marked. With white hand lightly touching a shoulder, the mayor stood thus for a brief space, then spoke again:

"The deed was done before I came upon the ground, as doubtless you will recall, gentlemen, so I am dependent upon your testimony. Now—did any one of you all hear that death-shot fired?"

Only a few made answer, but nearly every head there swayed in negation.

"Did this gentleman draw a weapon before poor Hunter fell back?"

The same answer came, with a few words in addition: no weapon was drawn, but a blow was aimed and delivered.

"That blow cuts no figure whatever, since Dr. Brewster declares that death came from shot of gun or pistol," reminded the mayor. "Let there be no mistake, I beg of you, citizens! One of our number—my personal friend of many years, and partner of latter days—has been most foully done to death, just as similar fates have overtaken others whose names are still fresh in your memory. We must avenge this assassination at any and all costs; but—not by doing foul murder in turn!"

The white hand rose and fell lightly as though to emphasize his meaning, then Ransom Eldridge added in less somber tones:

"This gentleman could not possibly have killed Pike Hunter, else some among you would assuredly have heard the shot and noticed the smoke of burning powder."

"Pike's dead, hain't he?" demanded the owner of that monotonous voice who had cut a prominent figure before. "Who did kill him, then?"

At this blunt question that forced composure gave way, and for once in his life Ransom Eldridge permitted the rabble to catch fair view of his unmasked visage.

His hands clinched tightly, flying up with an almost spasmodic gesture, his massive face flushed until it seemed nearly purple, while his mobile lips quivered and his voice broke into a hoarse, groaning cry as of one in mortal agony.

"Oh, I'd give one half of all my property to know just that! I'd sacrifice my good right hand if I knew by so doing I could solve this awful mystery which—"

He broke off abruptly, fighting back his choking emotions, then huskily breaking forth anew with the questions:

"Who killed Owen Yarwood? Who murdered Michael Mahoney? What caused the still unexplained disappearance of David Ashmole? Who? Who but the same pitiless demon whose latest atrocity we have but now come from viewing—poor Pike Hunter!"

Turning abruptly away like one who feels ashamed or unwilling to make a further exhibit of his emotions, the mayor muttered in an undertone to the waiting physician:

"Give it to 'em again, Brewster! There's some of them still hankering after the rope, and for the city's good name we can't permit

any such outrage as *that* would prove, under the circumstances."

Catching his meaning with sufficient clearness, Dr. Brewster stepped into the breach as a stop-gap until the mayor could regain his wonted nerve, and slowly running over the facts his surgical skill had elicited, proved to his own satisfaction at least, that the mysterious slayer must have fired that silent shot from directly in front of the now dead man.

"The missile entered his mouth, and I cut the bullet out from the back of his neck. Now, if you can decide among you just *how* Mr. Hunter was facing when he showed the effects of that secret blow, at least you will have a clue as to the spot where the assassin must have been standing when that fatal shot was fired!"

The matter might have been more clearly put, perhaps, but Dr. Brewster was perfectly satisfied with both summing up and himself, judging from his smiling visage as he bowed his conclusion.

If nothing else, he had give Ransom Eldridge time to rally his powers once more, and now the mayor claimed their attention, his hand again resting on an arm of the bare-headed passenger as before, but with a significant difference: then it was as a guard, now as a friend!

"You have heard all that is in our power to explain, as yet, my good friends. How ardently I wish it was more, perhaps you can guess!"

"Then we hain't gwine to do nothin'—"

"What *can* we do, more than we have already done, I ask you?"

"Kill the devil who butchered pore Pike—that's what!"

"And so we will—I swear it! And since you all agree that this gentleman couldn't possibly have killed Hunter, I'm doubly glad he's here, to help us out! For, who can do that better than Don Darling, the *Denver detective?*"

CHAPTER IV.

THE DANDY AND THE MAYOR.

At this totally unexpected ending, the stranger in town gave a little start and sudden frown of annoyance; but the harm, if any, was already done, and open resentment would only make a bad matter worse.

If Eldridge noticed this, he gave no sign, speaking rapidly to those assembled before the hotel.

"You all know how intimately I was acquainted with them all: with Yarwood, and Mahoney, and Ashmole, and now—poor Pike Hunter! You know that, so to speak, we were as members of a single family! You know that for many long and troubled years we shared like and like together, bearing up under the storms of adversity until now—curse the demon who has wrought all this bitter, black ruin!"

It was the final outbreak of passionate nature, seemingly, and the mastery was regained as soon as lost, outwardly at least.

"Knowing this much, then, gentlemen, you can more fully appreciate my sentiments when I repeat: I'm glad that Mr. Darling has been publicly drawn into this ugly tragedy, since it was fated to occur, for now he will have a personal interest in solving this horrible mystery!"

"This is all I care to say, for the present, except just this: If there is any man present within reach of my voice as I speak, who still holds a doubt as to the perfect innocence of Mr. Darling, let that person hold up his hand, or else step frankly to the front."

Neither hand, word nor step challenged the stranger, and after waiting for something like half a minute, the mayor gave a grim nod of approval, adding:

"I thank you, in the name of my friend, Mr. Darling," with a grave bow which included all those within eye-range.

Taking it for granted that the stranger was fully cleared from all suspicion of having an actual hand in the mysterious killing of the freckled desperado, Mayor Eldridge turned away, to let drop a few words into the ear of Jerome Felton.

"Take charge of the body, Felton, you and Creed Wallace, please. You understand what remains to be done, of course?"

"I reckon so," with low but grim empha-

sis. "This isn't the first time, Ransom, but—will it prove to be *the last*, I wonder?"

"I hope so—I could almost pray so!" came the husky answer, as their right hands met in a close grip.

All of this Don Darling took note of, quietly remaining where left by the mayor. Until he had a more perfect idea of his surroundings, he was quite willing to remain a dependent, so to speak.

Turning from Felton to his more recently formed acquaintance, and for the first time seeming to notice his bare head, the mayor gave a nod which drew the other after him into the hotel.

"Your baggage is here, of course?" Eldridge asked.

"Hardly, I fear," with a faint smile. "What little I had—a pair of grips—went off with the stage, I fancy."

"They will be safe enough, at the Express Office, then. But you have no hat?"

"Thanks to your—to Mr. Pike Hunter—no," with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "I won a wrong idea as to the nature of your town, Mr. Eldridge, else I'd hardly have worn a silk tile from Denver! And now—only for that hat, *he* might be alive!"

"I don't think that way," came the swift, guarded interjection from the lips of the mayor, his big brown eyes casting a wary glance around as though fearing espial from some hated and feared enemy. "I believe the trap was ready set and only waiting for the opportunity! But let that pass for now; wait here for a moment, will you?"

The mayor hurried away, passing into the office, from whence he soon reappeared, bearing a fairly presentable felt hat which he handed to the man from Denver.

"Put it on, until you can do better, friend. Now—you're going with me, of course!"

This was an assertion, rather than a query, and with a degree of meekness by no means his customary habit, the young man yielded to that guiding touch upon his arm, and the two men left the hotel, passing up the street, neither seeming to notice the curious glances which were cast after them by the still lingering crowd.

But few words passed between the two as they strode along, and those hardly touched upon personal matters. The mayor did explain that he was bound for his own residence, where he lived a bachelor life with only a male housekeeper, but beyond that no information was vouchsafed.

Although for several years quite noted in mining circles, Chloride City was by no means a metropolis as to dimensions, and hence it did not take many minutes to cover the ground lying between The Grand and the mayor's residence, although the last-named structure was pretty well up to the northern limit of the "city."

Don Darling gave an involuntary nod of approval as the house was pointed out to him, for this was something better than he had expected, in such a town.

Although only a story and a half in height, built of wood, the house was really picturesque with its pointed gables and dormer windows, where an unusual amount of "gingerbread work" had been indulged in through jig and scroll saw. The paint was neat and fresh, and several shapely trees had been left as nature planted them, ages ago.

In front of the building ran a broad porch, the slightly sloping roof of which was guarded by an ornamental railing.

All of this Don Darling took in at a passing glance, but his mind was far too seriously disturbed by the unfortunate events of that evening for him to do more than give that brief tribute to the taste of his present guide.

Entering the building, then, Ransom Eldridge turned to again clasp the hand of his guest, his voice earnest enough as he uttered:

"Welcome, Mr. Darling! And doubly welcome if—as I dare to hope—your coming is to prove the signal for more light!"

Instead of replying with equal frankness, the man from Denver cast a keen, searching look around, then glanced inquiringly into the face of his host.

"There is no one to hear our words, if that is your meaning," came the instant assurance. "My man is out at this hour, rustling up something for supper. But,

even if he was here, and impudent enough to listen to what was none of his concerns, he'd surely expose himself through his own infirmity; Dick is almost as deaf as the proverbial post!"

While giving those explanations, Eldridge was leading the way into a side room, where a table strewn with papers, and a small desk provided with writing appliances, proclaimed it the master's particular sanctum.

Brushing the papers to the desk from the table, Eldridge begged his guest to be seated, then placing cigars and liquid refreshments on the table before taking another seat for himself.

Neither man seemed in haste to take advantage of these hospitable arrangements, however, and the mutual drift of their thoughts was shown by the words next let fall by the mayor.

"I'm glad to see you—and safely in here! At one time I hardly dared expect such a happy ending to that—ugh!"

Eldridge shivered perceptibly as he mentally recalled the past, and his tones were not steady as he added:

"You surely were born under a lucky star, Darling! If not, you'd hardly have stood off that crowd long enough for me to work to the front, as I contrived to do, at length!"

"There was actual danger, you think then?"

"More; I *know* there was! Although he hardly looked that sort, poor Hunter was an almost general favorite in Chloride, and to see him downed by a complete stranger, as it seemed—well!"

A frown crept over that handsome young face, and almost as though talking to himself, Don Darling muttered:

"Poor devil! Who *could* have killed him? And how was the trick turned so smoothly?"

"That's part of what we earnestly hope you will bring to light, sir!"

That frown deepened and a half-angry gleam came into Darling's hazel eyes as he bluntly retorted:

"I hardly think as much, sir, from your words back yonder!"

Eldridge gave a start of undisguised surprise, then asked:

"What do you mean by that, my dear, sir? Surely I never—"

"Why didn't I come to town with a brass band at my heels, and an advertising wagon for my chariot?"

At this query, the mayor gave another start, but this one was of comprehension, and his puzzled expression gradually altered to a look of grim decision which fitly matched the low laugh which followed.

"I catch on, as the boys say, my friend!"

"'Twould have been more to the purpose if you'd caught on before," bluntly declared the man from Denver. "What crazy notion made you publish my name and profession broadcast to all that rabble?"

"Well, for one thing I had to clear your skirts from even the suspicion of having taken part in the death of poor Pike," seriously explained the mayor, seeing how thoroughly in earnest his opposite now was. "If I hadn't, your head would have turned mighty frosty, this very night!"

"Do you really think 'twould have gone so far as that, Eldridge?"

"I don't merely *think*, I just *know* it would! And, for another reason which I'll explain in good time, I wanted to give full notice that the fight to the death was now fairly on!"

"A finish-fight, but with whom?"

No answer was immediately forthcoming to this question. Ransom Eldridge bowed his head, covering both eyes with his white hands. And he remained thus for the space of fully two minutes, Don Darling keeping equal silence, possibly because he also had ample food for thought.

"I promise to give you all the information in my power, Mr. Darling," said the mayor, finally lifting his head, his face showing traces of more or less intense emotion still, but his voice sounding cool and firm. "But I would prefer giving your eyes a chance before regaling your ears."

"In other words, sir?"

"I believe I can show you the identical creature who has wrought all this trouble!"

impulsively cried Eldridge, his eyes now almost glowing with their fierce ardor. "I firmly believe I can point out to you the assassin—not only of Pike Hunter, but of at least two other good men, if not three—this very evening!"

This was far more than the man from Denver dared expect, and his own face caught an unusual flush as he listened. Surely Ransom Eldridge would not make use of such positive terms unless he had ample grounds for believing what he said.

"You say you can do all that? Who is the man, then?"

The mayor shook his head, with a fleeting smile, then said:

"No man at all, my dear sir! That is, supposing my careful deductions are correct, as I now firmly believe they are."

"What! No man? Surely you don't—not a woman, then?"

"Or what passes in Chloride City for a woman, yes!" positively.

"It hardly seems possible!" declared Darling, still shaken. "What woman is it you mean, then?"

"Wait until you see the Silver Queen, then ask me that! An angel of light to some, but to me—a *three-fold murderess*!"

CHAPTER V.

THE SILVER HORN.

RECENT events had in a measure prepared the Dandy from Denver to look for something out of the ordinary rut, but this came as a positive surprise, and his handsome face betrayed as much.

"A woman? Surely there must be some mistake, sir!"

Ransom Eldridge gave a shrug and a hand-gesture at this.

"You forget that this is Chloride, my dear sir," came his half-sneering reminder. "What might easily prove impossible in New York, or even your own city, Denver, comes almost as a matter of course with such classes as gather to one of our big mineral rushes. And so I repeat—I believe this mysterious slayer to be not only a woman, but one who just now is all the rage in Chloride City!"

"It really seems incredible, as I said before," gravely uttered Don Darling in turn, "but of course you are by far the better judge as to that. Still, if so positive in your belief, why have you delayed action until now?"

"Belief is not proof, remember," came the grave response, and from that moment Ransom Eldridge suppressed all show of excitement or of angry prejudice from face and voice. "What might fully satisfy *my* mind might make no impression whatever upon *yours*, and though we both might feel firmly convinced our case was proven, still others might honestly dispute our action, even to swearing black was snow-white."

Don Darling simply bowed in answer to this speech. It was a self-evident proposition, and called for no argument.

Of the two phases thus far presented him, he rather preferred the impetuous, because the more natural, side of that character. Still, it was the man himself he was most desirous of studying just then, since he had come all the way from Denver to enlist under his banner for what now bade fair to prove a death-struggle.

So far the impression had been more than favorable, as it doubtless would have been, even had not that opportune arrival materially lessened the awkwardness of the dilemma so abruptly confronting him.

As previously intimated, Ransom Eldridge was a large man, physically speaking, both as to height and to breadth, saying nothing of thickness.

Fully six feet tall, with erect frame and broad shoulders, this had gradually altered with growing years, the framework filling and rounding out until now the mayor of Chloride City was portly without being fat, dignified without being pompous, a comely, well-preserved gentleman of something like half a century of life.

He wore no mustache, his firm upper lip being shaven, but for the rest his beard was worn uncut though neatly kept. Both it and his rather scanty crop of hair had once been rich chestnut in color, but now the

silver threads were lending both a grayish tinge.

His big brown eyes showed no signs of growing years, however, and as Don Darling met their gaze, he could feel their magnetic power, even as the large majority of Chloride's citizens had experienced it before him.

These notes were taken by the Dandy from Denver during the brief pause which Ransom Eldridge made in order to let his meaning fully impress his present guest, and now the mayor added:

"Since you follow me so far, Mr. Darling, I hardly think I need press that point further. While almost wholly satisfied in my own mind as to the evil spirit who is and has been at the bottom of all this trouble, I greatly prefer making no positive accusations until after you have been given a fair chance to judge for yourself."

"You speak as though such an opportunity was readily won, sir?"

"I see nothing serious in the way, Mr. Darling."

"So much the better for our side, then? You were saying?"

"That while I firmly believe Madam Silver is at the bottom of all our trouble, still I must decline to actually accuse her of murder until I have given you a chance to see and judge for yourself. Do you agree to this, Mr. Darling?"

"If it rests with me to give the decision, yes," promptly came the answer. "Only—how will you bring it about?"

"Easily enough," with an air of growing confidence, now he had won that first point. "Madam Silver is on exhibition nightly, at the Silver Horn."

"A sporting resort, I take it?" came the half-query, half-assertion, as the man from Denver arched his brows a bit beyond the natural.

"Saloon and gambling-room, exactly," came the confirmation. "We are a full-fledged city, so far as title and airs can make one, but we are still hardly beyond the wild-and-woolly stage, remember," said the mayor, with an apologetic smile in passing.

"And still run things wide open, I fancy?"

"Wide open all the time, and under high pressure for the most part," was the frank admission. "And that's one reason why I have so little hesitation in promising you a fair view of the Silver Queen this very night, if you care to take the trouble."

"She runs this sporting resort, then?"

"Well, not openly, at least," said Eldridge, hesitating slightly like one hardly knowing just what word to employ for his purpose. "Fred Freestone, an all-round sport and gambler, takes that credit to himself; but the Silver Queen takes a turn nightly at dealing faro for all comers, and I more than suspect she has a full interest in the place, even if Freestone isn't playing proprietor on a salary."

So far Darling's questions had come freely enough, but now he hesitated, frowning darkly as he twisted the end of his brown mustache between his thumb and forefinger.

"I'm more than ever sorry that you spoke so freely, back at the hotel, Mr. Eldridge," he said, presently. "Of course it's like crying over spilled milk, but I can't help saying it!"

"I fully intended to act under cover in this case when I accepted the offer made me, else I would have come to Chloride City under a very different aspect. But, now—"

He was checked by an uplifted hand, followed by the grave words:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Darling, if you really deem an apology called for on my part. I acted for what I deemed the best, *then*, and as yet I have seen no cause to alter that belief."

"You think it a sign of wisdom, then, to publicly notify your game before taking up its track?"

"I'd rather not attempt to argue the case right now, sir," with a touch of stiffness entering his manner, although his tones remained all that the most exacting could wish for. "I acted for the best, as I told you before. I will explain more fully, later on, and when you have heard my reasons in *extenso*, I hardly think you will fault me for so acting."

As he uttered these words, Ransom Eldridge rose from his chair, adding quietly:

"If you will kindly excuse me for a few moments, sir, I'll give orders about supper. My man has returned, judging from the racket he is producing, kitchen-wards. Meanwhile," completing his sentence by a graceful wave of his white hand toward the refreshments, then calling attention to a small but neat collection of books against the wall.

When left alone, however, the Dandy from Denver turned to neither of these creature comforts thus suggested, but sat with elbow resting on table and brows clasped by fingers, staring at vacancy while his brain slowly passed in review the truly startling events which had signalized his arrival at Chloride City.

Before starting on that trip which terminated so tragically, Don Darling had been warned to expect something out of the ordinary rut, but even with such a significant hint in advance, he was wholly unprepared for anything like this.

Who had killed Pike Hunter? How had that death-shot—taking the report handed in by Dr. Brewster as accurate—been winged without attracting notice of a single one out of the many there assembled?

Visions of air-guns and powder both smokeless and soundless, assailed the musing man, but through all that perplexing mist still drifted, confusing all things if only by distortion.

Then, too, what about this Madam Silver? This Silver Queen?

Surely a woman could never have committed such atrocious crimes? And yet—would Ransom Eldridge say so much, without the power of saying still more?

Don Darling was still lost in mazy thought when his present host came back to assure him supper was being hastened as rapidly as possible, and without actually intruding upon him, the mayor so contrived his movements as to hinder anything like connected thought for that hour of waiting.

Don Darling suspected as much, and his idea was confirmed by the mayor himself after the masculine housekeeper and cook combined had left them to enjoy the really appetizing meal his hands had prepared.

"I'd rather you wouldn't even try to cipher it out until after you have had a fair view of the Silver Queen," formed part of his frank admission over that meal. "Wicked as I honestly believe that woman, I want you to judge her without even a trace of my prejudice, Mr. Darling."

The Denver Dandy said nothing, one way or the other; but his mind was busy enough to make up for lack of speech.

Was Ransom Eldridge really so impartial as he tried to make out? If so, why say all that had passed his lips? Surely he had done enough to prejudice even the most impartial of judges!

Supper leisurely discussed, the two men lighted cigars and left the house, arm-in-arm as they strolled down-town, nothing in their outward appearance betraying their serious business now fairly in hand.

"Of course you must be prepared for more or less staring," warned the mayor as they walked along through the pleasant evening. "You'd have your share of that, even without the sad happening of to-day; but so long as you are under my wing, staring is the very worst you need apprehend."

"I'll try to endure it," coolly answered the dandy. "I left off modesty when I put on my insignia as dude, and if I only had your cane," with a half-humorous glance toward that article, "I'd be prepared for—Isn't that our sign, right ahead?"

"The Silver Horn? Yes," promptly declared the mayor. "We'll drop in there first, just as though we'd set out to do the town in regular order. Now—eyes wide open, and ears at full cock!"

Without further delay the saloon door was passed, and Don Darling had barely time for a swift glance around, to take note of the customary appointments: bar, mirror, glittering glasses and decanters; sanded floor and bright oil-lamps; buzzing customers and bustling bartenders; in one word, the many items which all combine to form a prosperous resort of this description.

Then his attention was claimed by the mayor, who cordially spoke:

"Friends of mine ought to know each

other, so—Mr. Darling, Mr. Freestone; Fred, this is a gentleman from Denver, come here at my urgent request to help us get at the bottom facts of these devilish assassinations!"

"Happy to meet you, Mr. Darling," said the sport, bowing with cold grace as their hands joined in a firm pressure. "May you prove successful in solving our mystery, and I'll be one of the foremost in singing your praises, in season and out!"

"I can hardly hope for success where so many better men have failed, yet there remains the good old saying as encouragement: A fool for luck!" easily uttered the Dandy from Denver, softly joining in the laugh which greeted his words.

The proprietor of the Silver Horn, tall, athletic, perfect of form as he surely was handsome of face, seemed in an earnest rather than a merry mood just then, for both face and tones were grave as he addressed the mayor:

"Not that I want to seem crowding the mourners, Mr. Eldridge, but—how about the share or shares in the Climax which Hunter held?"

"How about them?" echoed the mayor, seemingly at a loss to comprehend just what the gambler was driving at.

"Yes. How are they to be disposed of? By private sale, or openly to the highest bidder?"

"I can give you no information on that point until after the board has had its next regular sitting," gravely said Eldridge, his lids drooping before that keen, almost intense gaze.

"Cannot, or will not, Mr. Eldridge?"

"Either or both, then!"

"Thanks," with a cold bow. "At least you will permit me to say this much while we are touching on the subject: the Silver Horn stands ready to outbid any and all competitors for the share or shares which Pike Hunter held in the mine Climax at the moment of his death."

"You talk just as though you meant it, too!"

"I do mean it, sir! If those shares are for sale I'll buy them, provided ready cash can do that much!"

"You know a good thing when you see it, then, Freestone?"

"If you mean the Climax by that, I think I do," was the cold reply.

"Still, you'd hardly buy in at the price of murder, Fred?" spoke the mayor, his voice sounding almost painfully distinct to all standing near.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SILVER QUEEN.

A VIVID flush leaped into the face of the gambler, then vanished as quickly as it came, leaving him absolutely colorless save for his eyes and heavy, drooping mustaches.

Instinctively more than one stout fellow shrunk away from that immediate spot, for such words as those, even when uttered so smoothly, almost surely call for deadly missiles; but instead of dealing blow or drawing weapon, Fred Freestone coldly spoke:

"Now it is my turn to ask your meaning, Mr. Eldridge. Am I to take that thinly-veiled insinuation to myself, then?"

"Don't you think it even for an instant, man dear!" impulsively exploded the mayor, white hands going up with added deprecation.

"Still, you said—"

"That no matter how highly you might estimate the value of Climax stock, you'd never try to buy it through killing a prior owner," promptly repeated the other, with a neat shifting of words.

No actual fault could be found with this explanation, yet the keen sting had gone surely home, and was now rankling bitterly.

Still, an apology so frank, so open, so complete as this could not well be ignored, and the Silver Horn proprietor bowed his acceptance.

"Of course that settles it, sir, since you disclaim meaning me."

"Of course I knew you'd never be guilty of such a thing, Freestone."

"Then why make use of words which certainly favored that interpretation, Mr. Eldridge?"

"Because, nothing less positive would ex-

press my meaning," came the quick response. "Of course I know that you could never stoop to such devilish means for gaining an end, but I firmly believe that some one is trying to scare the rest of us out, since they can't buy in!"

A little outburst came from the interested witnesses, but Freestone betrayed no emotion at all, coldly saying when that murmur died away:

"Right or wrong, I have nothing to do with that, Mr. Eldridge. If the belief you express is meant to convey a hint, it fails to touch me. For," with a slow, peculiar smile lighting up his really handsome visage, "whenever I have occasion to scare, I just straddle the blind and—kill!"

Like one who feels all has been said that is essential, the Silver Horn Sport turned away with a low bow, seemingly deeming it his duty as host to entertain other guests in their turn.

Throughout this rather peculiar interchange of words, Don Darling had said nothing and done but little more.

Falling modestly back, as any stranger might, he made a pretense of carrying out the role under which he had seen fit to enter Chloride City, and with monocle fixed in his eye, he gazed half-vacantly around the place, for the time being only lacking his ruined silk tile to be the veritable Dandy from Denver.

He saw pretty much what may be seen in at least one-half of the larger, more exclusive sporting establishments to be found in live and lively Western towns which are backed by a solid mineral boom: a large structure of frame, the front end of the ground floor being devoted to the bar proper, with a wide archway and heavy woolen curtains serving to partly or completely shut off the larger space beyond.

Even while that brisk passage of tongues was under way, Don Darling took note that a few persons were slipping through the portieres, evidently finding still greater attractions beyond the bar.

And now that the once threatening aspect had turned to blissful peace, still others moved in that direction, thus relieving the then uncomfortably full saloon proper.

Almost mechanically Don Darling edged nearer those masking curtains, and noting this fact, Mayor Eldridge likewise moved in that direction.

But just as the Denver Detective's hand closed upon the soft, rich material, and before he could draw the curtain aside for their passage, Eldridge grasped an arm, whispering without visibly moving his lips:

"Take another glance back, Darling. Note who Freestone's talking to just now, please."

Without change of expression or any movement to call attention his way, the Dandy from Denver complied with this wish, finding no difficulty in doing so, thanks to the recent thinning of that crowd.

The back of the Silver Horn Sport was turned that way, but this only gave Darling a more favorable view of the being in whom the mayor appeared to feel an interest of some description, and he made the most of his opportunity.

Fred Freestone was a tall man, but the person with whom he was now engaged was taller still; fully four inches above the six-foot standard, and seeming even taller than that owing to the gauntness of his frame.

Garments of coarse, cheap material, showing ample signs of long wear and hard usage, yet neatly patched wherever the original cloth had given way too utterly for darning.

A bandless and nearly shapeless hat. A rusty leather belt, to which were appended knife and revolver, while the little narrow loops were filled with fixed ammunition for the Winchester rifle now lying easily in the hollow of his left arm.

Long hair which fell to his stooping shoulders, and mingled with a full beard of patriarchal length and prideful luxuriance, now of almost snowy whiteness, save for a band of tobacco-yellow reaching several inches below his lower lip.

All of this the Denver Detective took in almost at a glance; but short-lived as was his scrutiny, a score of years might have rolled over his head without obliterating the photograph thus taken by his brain.

Turning and passing between the heavy curtains, Don Darling cast a comprehensive glance over the scene thus laid bare before them, at the same time imitating the guarded whisper of his guide:

"I've taken his likeness: why should I, though?"

"Give you my reasons later on, only—that was Reuben Reeves, and he is at least a possible factor in the puzzle you've come here to unriddle for us!"

"And yonder is—the Silver Queen?" softly murmured the Dandy from Denver, his dark-brown eyes winning an additional glow as the sudden moving of a man who stood at a faro-table adown the room, gave him an unobstructed view of the personage then occupying the chair set apart for the dealer.

"Madam Silver, for a fact!" affirmed the mayor, both face and voice betraying a touch of unusual excitement just then. "Look your fill, my dear sir, and never fear giving offense through betraying your interest! That is part of the programme! That belongs to the role of the Silver Queen, don't you know!"

If he heard, Don Darling paid no outward attention to those bitter sounding sentences which came so hotly from the mayor's lips. For the time being he had eyes and thoughts only for the mysterious creature who was best known in Chloride City as "Madame Silver," or as the "Silver Queen."

Either title seemed wholly appropriate to the Denver Detective as he stood there gazing upon that statuesque figure during those first few moments.

The woman was tall and of nearly statuesque perfection so far as physical outlines went; queenly was the right term to apply, he thought.

Yet it was not this perfection which so powerfully impressed Don Darling at first sight. He had seen beautiful women before this. And yet—was the Silver Queen to be classed among the ornaments of that beauty list?

If so, the decision must be given on faith, for not the slightest glimpse of her face could be caught, although her position was such as to give the man from Denver something better than a mere profile view.

From crown to sole this mystery was covered with cloth of silver; it seemed nothing less than woven threads of the unalloyed metal, shining as though each thread had been carefully burnished, whenever a movement of her superb figure caught the lamp-light at a different angle.

From crown to sole, yet all contrived so cunningly as to mask without distorting, to conceal yet let see, to form the most thorough of disguises while permitting one to decide that naught of grim feature or mortifying disfiguration led the Silver Queen to adopt the habit.

Robed in silver threads from crown to sole, yet remaining a thing of beauty as well as of grace. Covered face and neck and hair—with long gloves that covered her hands down to the last joint of thumbs and fingers, those bits of pink nature being left unprotected, because to carry the mask further would seriously impair, if not utterly destroy, her serviceableness as faro-dealer.

All this Don Darling took in with marvelous swiftness, and for the moment forgetting his guide and protector as a lamb among wolves, he moved toward the table at which the Silver Queen presided, her pink-tipped hands of woven silver now slipping the shuffled cards back into the silver dealing box.

In a slow, drawling voice the black-browed employee who "kept case" gave the set phrase announcing that the deal was about to begin, and naming the "soda," or card exposed by the pack being placed within the box, face upward.

Although the evening was still young, times were good, and patronage more than fair, though a portion of this was undoubtedly attributable to the sentiment which was now holding Don Darling a spectator: interest, mingled with curiosity concerning the Silver Queen.

He could see now that her mask was woven with apertures to fit the eyes, nostrils and lips, but while giving one a tantalizing glimpse of the face itself, its nature was such as to defy one's keenest judgment

when exercised in an endeavor to decide the actual age of the wearer.

As far as judgment went, the Silver Queen might be still in her teens, or well along toward the turning-point of life, all depending on the one who made the nearly blind guess.

Neither Eldridge nor Darling attempted to press near enough to the table to place a bet, but securing a position from whence they could observe all that was going on, with the minimum of fatigue or inconvenience to themselves, they waited: the mayor in cold patience, the detective taking mental notes as he covertly studied yonder masked mystery.

Then an incident took place which went far toward casting light of a certain sort upon the Silver Queen, and at the same time showing her by no means unfitted to occupy that responsible position.

Among the players who had been unable to obtain seats at the table, and who were obliged to lean over those seated in order to place a bet, was a burly, roughly-garbed fellow, who just now leaned forward to shove a waiting bet from one painted card to another close by.

It was nothing more than was being done at brief intervals, but the dark eyes of the Silver Queen were upon the alert, and that dirty paw had hardly touched the chips before her gleaming hand shot out a revolver, rapping those knuckles sharply with its plated barrel.

"You are burning your fingers, sir," the Masked Mystery said, in low, but deep and perfectly clear tones.

"Reckon I've got a right to— Quit, dug-gun ye, critter!"

That bit of metal rose and fell with stronger emphasis, and a tiny spot of blood showed where a knuckle lost a portion of dirty skin.

"Hands off, sir! You are trying to steal a bet, and—"

"Steal nothin'!" blustered the fellow, with a show of honest indignation. "Ef you wasn't a woman which—"

"This is not a woman, Tom Birchwood!" came a cold, almost metallic voice from the fellow's immediate rear, and at the same instant the cold muzzle of a revolver chilled his cheek and almost barked his nose as he turned in that direction—to encounter the coldly-blazing eyes of Fred Freestone.

"I never—I didn't—don't shoot, boss!" huskily gasped the cowed knave, shrinking away from eyes even more than from pistol.

Space was cleared as if by magic, but the rascally fellow could not retreat further than the table itself, and there the Silver Sport pinned him while demanding of the case-keeper and general looker-out what had caused the disturbance.

"Tried to snoop a sleeper, sir," came the answer, confirmed by the careless player whose inattention to his own wagers had given Birchwood the opening for his bit of fraud.

Fred Freestone coldly obliged the fellow to admit his trickery, and then to beg pardon of Madam Silver for interrupting the game.

This done, he replaced his weapon and jerked the cringing knave away from the table, giving him a kick and a shove that sent him into the brawny arms of another employee who generally acted as "bouncer."

"Kick him out, Harry," coldly ordered the proprietor. "And you, Tom Birchwood, come back here at your peril!"

Without waiting to observe how that order for bouncing was performed, Fred Freestone bowed toward the masked dealer, and the game went on as quietly as before.

Only until the cards were all drawn from the silver box and the lay-out cleared from bets, for then Madam Silver rose from her chair in obedience to another bow from the proprietor, passing around the end of the table, then gliding to a side door, through which she vanished.

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER BLOW FOR THE MINE.

As though that regally clad figure had been in reality a cunningly fashioned magnet, all eyes followed the Silver Queen until she vanished from view through that private adit, and Don Darling even caught himself

drawing a long, full breath as though that operation had been partially suspended during those moments.

The Silver Horn Sport stood at one end of the card-table, his handsome face cold and pale, only his unusually brilliant eyes betraying any degree of excitement beyond the common. One neatly kept hand rested on the painted cloth, the other at his hip, not far from where that business-like revolver had vanished from sight a short time before.

As soon as the gentle echo of that closing door died away; Fred Freestone moved along to slip into the chair so recently vacated, at the same time rapping sharply with his knuckles on the table, coldly saying:

"A moment's attention, please, gentlemen. As the majority of you ought to know by this time, the Silver Horn is mighty poor soil for growing warnings, friendly or otherwise. Now—take notice, please!"

"I have given one warning this evening, and that is crowding the limits. If another should become necessary to-night, I'll deliver it through the mouth of my deputy—this!"

As he uttered the final word, Silver Fred produced the same weapon which had caused the chip-stealer to "wilt" so abruptly, giving the muzzle a little tap against the lay-out before placing it most convenient to his pistol-hand.

Having said so much, and evidently deeming further speech a mere waste of words, the proprietor of the Silver Horn deftly squared the deck for shuffling, only that faint, breezy ripple breaking the perfect silence which greeted his terse address.

Slipping the cards into the polished box, the tall gambler coldly waited for the bets to be placed before slipping the soda card.

The delay was brief indeed, for among others who might be said to be there for the purpose of killing time, or spending an otherwise idle hour, there were a number of professional players, who would hardly hesitate to accept the new coffin of a close relative as a support for a faro-lay-out, lacking a less sentimental convenience.

Mayor Eldridge had availed himself of the opening to slip into one of the chairs, muttering apologetically to his dandified charge:

"For the good of the house, understand? I'll not be long, Darling."

Standing back of that chair the Dandy from Denver quietly watched as the deal progressed, and having rather more than a superficial knowledge of the game himself, he saw that Eldridge was by no means a novice at playing faro.

The city's highest official betrayed no inclination to "plunge," yet he was by no means niggardly in planking his bets, showing at least average judgment in their disposition, and winning pretty much as he lost, although only a critical observer would have known that, since his ventures were of ready cash, and his winnings discharged in like coin.

Mayor Eldridge merely sat through that one deal, then gracefully resigned his seat to another player, drawing back quietly to rejoin his companion, the change causing no disturbance, and hardly attracting a glance from dealer or player.

"Time enough to try it a whirl if the fancy is on, my friend," was his low-pitched greeting, but Don Darling shook his head, replying:

"Bless you my dear fellah, I hardly know one cahd from anothah, don't ye know?"

"Then I suppose we might as well be moving?"

The Dandy from Denver offered no objections to this suggestion, and as there seemed no use in spending further time on the chance of Madam Silver's returning to the tables, the two men quietly moved away in the direction of the saloon.

As Eldridge swept the heavy curtains apart, both pair of eyes took note of the same fact: Reuben Reeves was gone from the pace before them, for his tall, gaunt figure could not well be overlooked, even in a crowd far more dense than then occupied the white-aproned bartenders of the Silver Horn.

Still acting on his motto of "good of the house," Major Eldridge called for drinks, the Denver Dandy joining him at the bar, each sipping a delicate drink after the cus-

tomary fashion. And then, leaving a yellow coin on the bar to wipe off the score, and pleading urgent business as his excuse for not waiting "to see it out," Eldridge led the way from saloon to open air.

A rearward glance showed the mayor that they were not being followed by any of those they had thus politely parted from, and locking arms with the stranger from Denver, he strode quite briskly along, turning the first corner they came to after crossing the threshold of the Silver Horn.

"You seemed quite strongly impressed by the Silver Queen, Mr. Darling," was his first observation, although this did not come until they had fairly lost sight of the gambling establishment. "Is it too early to ask just what was the nature of that impression, sir?"

"Was this a fair sample of the show, then?"

"Pretty well for an average, yes. The usual seance was cut short, of course, and it's not often that the Silver Queen is forced to make her voice heard, but—*Ha!*"

Even as he spoke, there came the dull yet distinct sound of a bullet "spatting" against solid substance, and with his free hand flying up to the region of his heart, Ransom Eldridge staggered drunkenly clutching at and only saved from falling by the Denver Detective.

"Shot—hit hard, but—eyes open!" he huskily gasped, as Don Darling braced himself against that totally unexpected shock.

The sensitive-eared detective had heard that peculiar "slap," yet if it had not been for the noiseless slaying of Pike Hunter before his very face only a few hours earlier, he would never have thought of such a solution as the mayor now offered to that sound.

"Shot? You don't—impossible!" he cried, yet freeing one hand to clutch a pistol-butt as he glanced almost bewilderedly around, vainly looking for the would-be assassin.

Not a sound came to his ears to tell of either assault or of flight as he supported the shivering shape on one muscular arm; but that incumbrance was very short-lived.

Ransom Eldridge rallied with marvelous swiftness for one at all seriously injured, and jerking forth a revolver from its usual place of carriage, he hoarsely uttered:

"This way—right ahead! Follow and back me up, Darling!"

Betraying no signs of weakness or material injury, the mayor rushed ahead through the night, now in the middle of the street, seemingly confident as to the point from whence that silent missile had been winged for his heart.

Thoroughly amazed, since he had seen neither shape nor flash, had heard no sound or footfall or explosion, Don Darling still gave the backing called for, and with gun in grip held himself ready to fight or to foot-race, whichever might offer itself first.

The stars and moon were out in unclouded glory, yet objects at any material distance were vaguely outlined and indistinct. Still, it seemed out of the question for even so adroit an assassin to have you within night shooting distance, yet escape unseen.

Ransom Eldridge sped along until at the next corner, then came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the crossing, his pistol-hand going up to cover an indistinctly seen figure not far ahead on one of the side streets.

"Steady, you!" rung forth his stern challenge, followed almost instantly by the words: "What! 'tis *you*, Reeves?"

At the same instant Don Darling recognized that tall, gaunt shape by the light of the moon, and as Eldridge resumed his advance, he followed suit, ready to give what assistance might be called for.

"An' who give *ye* a license fer to hold *me* up, Ran Eldridge?" came the gruff retort from those white-bearded lips, and at the same time the Winchester swung its muzzle more to the front, ready for use in case of necessity.

"I wasn't looking for *you*, exactly, but—who ran past here just now, Reeves?"

"Never a livin' soul, to my knowin'," came the instant answer.

Another pause, during which the mayor seemed at a loss just what to say, or the wisest action to take. Darling said nothing, contenting himself for the present with acting as a reserve force.

"Look like somethin' hed hit ye crooked, boss," ventured the old hunter, permitting natural curiosity to overcome his real or assumed dislike for the official.

"Well, these are evil times, my friend," gravely spoke the mayor, evidently having chosen his course for the moment. "And—you say no person passed you in a hurry just now?"

"Ef once sayin' hain't plenty, reckon I kin double the dose," sourly returned the gaunt fellow. "They *didn't* nobody pass me until *you* come, an' I'm mighty free from henderin' *your* gittin' by, nuther!"

"Beg pardon, I'm sure," the mayor hastened to say. "I thought it at least possible that you might have seen—"

"I hain't see'd nur yit hearn nothin' that consarns *you*, Ran Eldridge, I don't reckon," grumbly cut in the other.

"Let it pass, then," still with remarkable good-nature under such trying circumstances, his weapon vanishing from view unobtrusively. "I must have been mistaken, of course. Still, now we have met—you have not been around lately with either fish or game, Reuben."

"Ef thar hain't plenty to go 'round, somebody's got to git left, 'pears like!"

"Well, please try to make my turn come 'round to-morrow, Reeves, for both fish and birds, if you can so arrange it without too much serious inconvenience to yourself," pleasantly added the mayor, then bidding the surly fellow a cordial good-night, he slipped a hand into Darling's arm, moving briskly away through the moonlight with no further attempt to discover the would-be assassin.

For several minutes he waited for the expected solution, but, while almost certainly moving in anything save a direct line to his place of residence, Ransom Eldridge said nothing more.

"Well?" finally hinted the Dandy of Denver.

"Anything *but* well!" exploded the mayor moodily adding: "Another blow for the mine! Only for my—and no clue—no sign left behind to tell who is doing all this devilment!"

"Was it really a shot, do you think, sir?"

"Why *think*, when I positively *know*?" almost surlily retorted Eldridge, his free hand rising to his left breast, just as it had when he gave that startled cry and recoil.

"But there was neither flash nor report!"

"Was there either or both when Pike Hunter went down?"

"No, but—did that bony fellow try it on, think?"

"*You* heard him say—no!"

"Of course he would not own up, but—who and what is he, sir?"

Instead of making prompt answer, Eldridge dropped that arm and caught at a weapon, crouching down and peering ahead from under a shading palm; but almost as abruptly he rose erect once more, muttering:

"Only a shadow, after all! I fancied it was moving, but—never mind just what and who old Reeves is, Darling! Time enough to show you the entire lay-out after we've safely reached home!"

Evidently abandoning all hopes of finding the mysterious marksman for the time being, Mayor Eldridge led the way directly toward his place of residence, neither man speaking again until the steps leading up to the front door were reached.

One or two moving figures were seen by the way, but Eldridge paid them no particular attention. Even if the secret assassin should be one of them, what proof could be brought against him, or her?

Nothing took place to add to their uneasiness, however, and as they gained the broad piazza, Eldridge gave a long breath of grim relief.

"That feels good—mighty good! Of course *you* can hardly appreciate it, Mr. Darling, but—well, never mind—for right now!"

Breaking off after this abrupt fashion, the mayor opened the door and stood aside for his guest to enter, then closing the barrier behind them, a deft finger causing a heavy bolt to fall into place.

Don Darling noted this fact, although he made no remark. It seemed but a portion of the grim mystery into which he had so

suddenly dropped, however, and his face was grave enough as he followed his host into the room where he had awaited the preparation of supper a couple of hours earlier.

A kerosene lamp was already lighted, though burning rather low during the proprietor's absence, and turning the wick higher, Ransom Eldridge gave his person a hasty inspection, then pointing to a bullet-hole in the left breast of his coat, drily observed:

"Pretty fair aim for a moonlight shot, don't you reckon, Mr. Darling? Squarely in line with my heart!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WHO WILL BE NUMBER FOUR.

THIS certainly seemed proof positive that an attempt had been made to slay the mayor of Chloride City, for even at that distance the sight of the Denver Detective was keen enough to assure him that it was indeed the mark of a bullet to which his attention was being called.

Don Darling leaned forward to make a closer inspection, but as if in ignorance of that desire, Ransom Eldridge turned abruptly away, saying almost curtly:

"Wait for me, please. I'll be back in a moment or two."

The mayor left the room by a door cut through the rear wall, and from the brief glimpse he caught through that opening, Don Darling felt assured that this was the chamber sacred to the repose of his host.

From beyond that closed door came a few muffled sounds, but before the Dandy from Denver could grow at all impatient through waiting, the mayor made his reappearance, a peculiar smile on his strong face, and a small parcel held in his right hand.

This article gave an odd sound as it fell upon the table at which the Denver Detective had taken a seat, and Don Darling gave a low ejaculation of interested surprise as he caught a fair sight of it.

"A skirt of mail—isn't it?" he cried, even before touching that dully gleaming object as it lay before his eyes.

"My life-preserver," amended his host, with a low, strange laugh as he moved nearer the table, his white finger stirring that little heap of cunningly fashioned metal links, "Only for this—*see!*"

Catching the skirt up and giving it a deft swing, Ransom Eldridge slipped it over his head, shaking it into place, the flexible links adjusting themselves to his added size, thanks to the garments he wore.

Smoothing the skirt down over the breast, and slightly bending his body to make amends for the contracted length, a fingertip touched a barely perceptible dent in those close links, directly over the heart of its wearer.

"Right there, you see!" explained the mayor, his big brown eyes all aglow under the lamplight. "You heard the slap, and now—well, where would *I* be right now, only for this—*life-preserver?*"

With another sudden twist and writhe, the mayor came out of that steel network, and deftly spreading the cunning fabric across the table-top, drew a chair for his own seating.

Don Darling with undisguised interest bent over that superb bit of work, admiring the skill of the artisan and the forethought of the man into whose hands the almost priceless bit of work had fallen.

Even without testing the mail with other than his eyes, Darling knew that no slight blow would even mar the integrity of those ingeniously linked bits of finely tempered steel; and the dent showed with what deadly force that silent shot must have been winged. And—*ha!*

His quick eye caught sight of a second dent, and a low, amused, yet bitter laugh broke from the firm lips of his host.

"Not *one*, but *two* others, my good friend," he said, in explanation, a deft change of the shirt showing the other dent as well. "And here, to complete the little museum!"

As he spoke, Ransom Eldridge placed three bits of partly flattened metal on the table at which they were sitting.

"Bullets, the lot of 'em!" ejaculated the detective, after picking up and glancing at the bits of battered lead.

"Precisely," confirmed the mayor, then pointing out one among its mates, he added: "And *this* one you heard smite—not *me*, but my pet investment!"

One side of this distorted bullet showed brighter than either of its mates, while powder had blackened the other side, where the ring which denoted its caliber was still plainly perceptible.

That alone was sufficient to show a practiced eye that the lead had come from a shell of modern days.

Don Darling thoughtfully weighed the piece of lead on a finger-tip, after taking note of the ring-impressions visible on the brighter side, then flashed a half-inquiring glance across at that stern visage before muttering:

"Plainly a killing was meant, but—*your* life or mine?"

Eldridge gave a slight start at those words, and a bit of color shot into his face, while his forefinger almost viciously tapped those older dents in the shirt of mail.

"There are *three*, as your eyes can tell you, Mr. Darling, and either one of those bits of lead would have bitten mighty nigh the seat of life, only for this protection. Now—look!"

He again slipped on the shirt, and once more called attention to those three dents; one over the heart, one at his left side, the third almost squarely in the center of his back as he turned around.

"Three shots, and every one of them struck me hard! The two earlier ones left me as many reminders—I can show you the fading bruises to-night if necessary!"

"No need, my dear sir," the astonished detective hastened to say. "I'm more than willing to grant you all such distinction without a dispute, rest assured! I merely wondered if that shot *could* have been intended to finish what Pike Hunter seemed inclined to begin?"

Ransom Eldridge laughed faintly at this disclaimer, but shook his head with returning gravity at that rising inflection.

"No. Poor Hunter had been drinking, and although that did not always make him quarrelsome, your occupying the box-seat which he whimsically held to be his natural privilege, led him to impose on one whom he just as naturally deemed a dandy dude."

"That was about the explanation I gave it myself," admitted Don Darling. "Well, granting that this shot was intended for *your* life, what ought to be our next move?"

Before making reply, the mayor removed his shirt of mail, tossing it across to the desk for the present. Then, resuming his chair, he lightly fingered those bits of battered lead, at the same time muttering as though for his sole benefit:

"Wonder if Madam Silver has an exclusive patent on a metal face-mask?"

His inference was plain enough, when taken in connection with the information he had already given his guest concerning the Silver Queen, yet Don Darling asked the question which was evidently expected:

"What made you think of that woman so suddenly, Eldridge?"

"Less abruptly than you think, maybe," was the grim reply.

"But you surely can't connect *that* woman with the shot, man, dear?"

The man from Denver seemed thoroughly in earnest as he said this, but his host was hardly shaken by that show of incredulity.

"I'm beginning to believe in the old saying, that there's nothing certain but death and taxes! And so—I say it over again: wonder if Madam Silver has patented her invention?"

Don Darling gazed steadily into those glowing brown orbs, and then slowly uttered the words:

"You mean a great deal more than your tongue has let fall, so far, Mr. Eldridge. Are you ready to trust me clean through, or am I expected to keep on working in the dark until I can supply light for myself?"

"Would that be wisdom, think?"

The man from Denver gave a shoulder-shrug before answering:

"That's for *you* to decide, sir, since you are to foot all bills. If I filled your shoes, however—"

"What would be your first step under those circumstances?"

"I would trust my agent wholly, or I'd

never go to the initial expense of engaging his services," was the cold reply.

Ransom Eldridge laughed softly, his own face smiling as that of his opposite turned dark and frowning. It seemed to restore his usual good-humor to see that of another destroyed, even for the minute.

That smile quickly passed away, however, and with an abrupt return of gravity to face and to voice, the mayor said:

"Of course I did not mean precisely what I said, still it was not altogether nonsense. You've seen enough to-night to know that I'm a marked man! Ay!" with a fierce, passionate gesture as his right hand clinched tightly. "*I'm a marked man! Marked for the grave!*"

"I hope not, sir," almost feebly consoled the detective, hardly knowing what else to offer, just then.

Ransom Eldridge gave a short, bitter laugh, then broke out with:

"What grounds have I to base such a hope upon, Mr. Darling? What reason have I for even doubting that this night may witness a fourth attempt upon my life? And," his tones suddenly growing a bit more husky as he added: "What's to hinder the next—and last—shot from being aimed at my brain, or at my throat?"

Don Darling attempted to murmur some reassuring words, but his well meant if rather clumsy efforts were coldly rejected by the mayor, who was bravely rallying from the fit of gloomy despondency into which the startling events of recent hours had cast him.

"What grounds for such a hope have I, then?" he repeated, almost harshly. "Three good men have been killed by this same secret enemy, yet never the faintest clue has been found to nail down the devilish assassin! Three good, stout, fearless lads! Now—who will be number four?"

Don Darling kept silence for the moment, knowing how little avail his words would be so long as that bitter mood lasted. But, like one who realized valuable time was being wasted, Ransom Eldridge fought back those thought-phantoms, and once more seemed his ordinary self.

"It's not often I give way like this, Mr. Darling," he said, apologetically, forcing a faint smile that rendered his strong face more natural than it had seemed since their return to the house. "I reckon it's mainly because I've counted so much on making a confidant of you! So long as I held a tight rein—well, let that pass, please!"

The detective gave a grave bow of comprehension, and their hands met above the table with a close and cordial grip. It was a silent compact, but none the less binding for the lack of words.

"You hold, then! that the same hand which killed Pike Hunter to-day, sent this shot at your life to-night, Mr. Eldridge?"

"I certainly do think just that, sir!"

"Have you anything more tangible than a bare belief, though?"

"Wait a moment, please," gravely asked the mayor, leaving his chair and crossing to the desk at the further end of the room, bending over it for a few moments before retracing his steps. "I'll show you at least a portion of my proofs, sir!"

In his hands gleamed a delicately-adjusted pair of the tiny scales which came into vogue with the gold fever of '49, and which are still popularly known as "miner's scales," being used to this day for the purpose of weighing out gold-dust.

Manipulating these delicate scales with all the skill which only long familiarity and practice can bestow, Mayor Eldridge first weighed the two older bits of lead against each other, proving them of almost exactly equal weight.

Next, he weighed the brightest bullet against each of the two first, in turn, then produced the bullet which Dr. Brewster had cut from the neck of Pike Hunter after death.

Up to this moment Don Darling had seemed rather listless, but now his brown eyes began to glitter and a faint access of color showed itself in both cheeks as he leaned closer to the mayor.

The scales very nearly balanced, that side holding the death-bullet sinking a trifle the lowest.

"That can be accounted for by bearing

in mind that *this* bullet is the worse battered, and that from contact with ridged metal," gravely explained the mayor. "Now, another fact, please; here is the weight, in grains, and here you have that of a regular .32 caliber bullet."

"Lighter than the ones you have saved from the secret slayer!" Don Darling exclaimed, then frowning a bit as he turned one of the latter over for another look at the ringed butt. "And I thought—it surely looks something smaller than the regular .32, Mr. Eldridge?"

"You carry a keen eye in your head, Darling," with a short, odd laugh, then producing a pair of small calipers, the points of which he adjusted to the base of a regular .32 bullet which he drew from its brass case. "How keen, let this demonstrate!"

Dropping the unmarred bullet as being of no further use, Eldridge picked up first one and then the other of the secret missiles, passing each unmarred ring through the jaws of the calipers without touching either side.

"Smaller caliber, for a fact!" ejaculated the detective. "Yet too large for either a .22 or a .25 unless my eyes are at fault!"

"They serve you most remarkable well, Mr. Darling," assured the mayor, as he brought those significant experiments to a close for the time being. "The bullets which struck me thrice, and the lead which carried instant death to poor Pike Hunter, are of neither caliber mentioned, And this being so, what inference do you draw?"

"That those shots were fired from gun or pistol of special make, and once seen, it ought to be readily recognized!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORY OF THE MINE.

MAYOR ELDRIDGE made another of his abrupt gestures, as though to pin attention to that point for the moment, then said:

"If once seen, yes! But how is that discovery to be made? Can you see the invisible? Hear the soundless? Grasp the intangible? Do all these things, Mr. Darling, then even *I* may hold some faint hopes of your being able to solve this death riddle!"

Under different circumstances, no doubt, the Dandy from Denver would have been ready enough with an answer, but sufficient had transpired since the declining of that day's sun to convince him this was no ordinary case, and before he could fairly decide upon the proper answer to give, Ransom Eldridge permitted his stiffened sinews to relax in a measure, and sitting more at ease in his chair, abruptly spoke again:

"It's nothing more than right that you should know just what sort of a case you are being asked to grapple with, Mr. Darling, but in order to make all clear even to a man of your trained wits, I've got to look back over a goodly space of time, if not of ground."

"Will you listen to my explanation, then?"

"My time is yours, Mr. Eldridge."

"Because I pay for it, eh?" with a short, odd laugh at that formal response. "I'd rather think of you as a friend than as a servant, Darling, and yet—small blame to you, either!" with a swift touch of bitterness entering his voice. "At best, we're hardly the most creditable customers, I'm free to admit!"

Flushing a bit, the emissary from Denver hastened to remove the disagreeable impression his words appeared to have made, but the mayor gravely cut his apology short.

"It's hardly worth mentioning, just now, Mr. Darling. I can readily understand your feelings, and am more than willing to wait for your final judgment until after you have fairly looked the whole matter over. To do that, however, you'd ought to learn all about the Climax Mine."

"Whenever you see fit to tell me, sir," assented the detective.

"It will sound prosy enough at the beginning, no doubt," abruptly commenced the mayor, frowning as he stared almost dreamily past his guest at the blank wall beyond. "It started just like hundreds of other life-histories have begun: just happened so!"

"I don't know now just what it was brought us all together in the first place. That is, beyond the mere fact that we were all poor, all eager to grow rich, all agreed

that the quickest if not the only method of doing that same was to keep stirring, keep hustling until one or more of us had actually 'struck it rich!'

"No three of us came from the same section of 'God's country,' even. I had my particular chum, and others had their side-pardners, almost as a matter of course; but, taken as an entirety, our company was composed of rank strangers, that day of the beginning."

"A sort of mutual benefit society, I suppose?" observed Don Darling, after a pause which the mayor seemed little inclined to break.

He was gazing at the wall, beyond, but those eyes seemed to see very little, and his wits to be astray.

Ransom Eldridge gave a swift start at sound of that voice, but as quickly rallied, speaking more like the cool, business man the Dandy from Denver had grown acquainted with since the mysterious slaying of Pike Hunter in front of The Grand.

"Some such title as that was proposed for our little company," he admitted, with a faint, half-cynical smile, "but it was voted down as savoring too strongly of frills. We were plain men, with only one object in life: to strike it rich in the briefest possible time!"

"We lacked just one of being a dozen; eleven in all, counting myself, you understand? And we talked it all over until it seemed that every point was covered, every contingency provided for. And then—this is the sort of agreement we made between us, Darling."

"We were to split up into small bunches; in couples, with one trio; and scatter over the mineral field in diverging courses, but with one single end: that of finding a prospect rich enough to amply justify the time it would take to fairly develop the claim."

"And, you understand, whether one or a score of such strikes were made, it was to make no difference *what* bunch did the *finding*, we all were to share and share alike."

"Do I make my meaning sufficiently clear, Mr. Darling?"

"You formed a sort of tontine company, not?"

"Somewhat modified, yes," slowly assented the mayor. "It was a sort of general grub-stake, you understand, where all expenses of outfitting and maintenance while fortune hung in the balance were to be pooled, and where the clean-up was to be shared in like manner whenever good-luck turned our way."

Taking this in connection with what had already been said to him or in his hearing, Don Darling had no particular difficulty in comprehending the method under which that party of old had begun work.

"Thanks. I'm catching on. I had the general idea, but wanted to be sure. It saves time in the end, I fancy, to cover each step carefully as one goes along."

"Don't mention it, Darling. I'm only too glad to have you ask questions, for doing so assures me you're entering sincerely into the case. And so—now I'll amble on!"

"When everything seemed fairly and squarely understood between us, we split up into little parts, each taking the course thought most favorable, but with the understanding that, make or break, we were to meet at a certain time, and at a certain point, to report progress and compare notes."

"Jerome Felton was my mate, then, although there were a number or years difference in our ages. Still, our folks had neighbored each other back in 'God's country,' and that helped even up the odds."

"We struck plenty of indications, and even found what would pay for the working, yet nothing extraordinarily rich. Still, 'twas heap sight better than no find at all, and we were not quite heartbroken when it came time to keep our rendezvous."

"Well, to cut it short, inside of forty-eight hours from the one named for our gathering together, the eleven pards were on hand, and had begun comparing notes."

"Of them all, only one couple had utter failure to report. The rest had struck prospects which promised to pay for pushing further, but of them all, one pair had been most fortunate, as we all agreed when their specimens were exhibited, passing from hand to hand in turn."

"They declared those samples only a fair

and impartial specimen of the silver ore which lay in a body hardly to be estimated, off-hand. And without a single dissenting voice, it was voted that the company first visit that prospect, to investigate *as* a company."

"That was the beginning of it all!" said Eldridge, with a long-drawn breath. "That offered us the wealth we had sworn to attain, but—more times than I can recall, now—I've often caught myself wishing that those two pards had died before making known their lucky strike!"

"It was what is now known as the Climax Mine, of course?"

"The Climax, yes," assented the mayor, that grave interjection seeming to restore his former nerve. "And when one of the company enthusiastically declared that it simply capped the climax—well, the name seemed just made for us, *then*!"

"Without a single dissenting voice it was decided to let all other prospects wait on this one. We would all fall to work until the Climax was thoroughly opened up, ready to put in a plant, or to be sold to a company, just as the day might determine."

"We did just that, too! All hands pitched in with hearty good-will, for each night proved our morning's hopes less, rather than over the mark, and now the days of wealth really seemed drawing near enough to date!"

"Well, when it was proven past a doubt that a big stroke of luck had come our way, the two pards who had reported the find, seemed to turn sour and surly, scowling where we laughed, growling where we felt far more like singing."

"Now and then they let fall words which left a disagreeable flavor in the mouth; hints that what was ample for two, was poverty when shared among many! But we let all that pass by without much heed, for we could understand their feelings—or what we fancied their feelings were, rather!"

"Even without putting in another stroke of work, the Climax had rich ore enough brought to light to insure a ready sale at big figures, once it was brought before moneyed men. And, only for that binding agreement of ours, all this would belong to the two lucky pards!"

Ransom Eldridge gave another long breath at this point, then shook his massive shoulders, forcing a brief laugh as his eyes met those of his present guest.

"It's harder to tell than I fancied it would be, Mr. Darling," he said, apologetically.

"Why not omit the minor details, sir?" gravely suggested the Denver Detective. "Merely summing up the main points will be sufficient, don't you think?"

The Mayor of Chloride City shook his head in negation.

"As you said a bit ago, it may save time in the end if we cover each step carefully while taking it," reminded Eldridge. "And so—I will tell it all, now the ice is fairly broken!"

"As I said, we tacitly agreed to pay no attention to those ugly looks and sour hints, for never a one of us all but believed 'twould pass over without more than growling, if we had only—but we *didn't*, and I reckon it was so written!"

"I haven't mentioned their names, as yet, nor will I, for the present. Neither will I tell you just which one of our little company it was who made the next discovery; nothing less than a diabolical plot to murder nine of us!"

"Is it possible?" ejaculated Darling, startled indeed.

"We doubted it, too, even with the testimony of one who had, luckily for us, chanced to overhear those two chums shaping the diabolical plot. It seemed impossible, and had that reporter not been one of the most steady, reliable men who ever drew the breath of life, we would never have credited it or him."

"Of course you took steps to foil that scheme?"

"Of course. Yet we would take nothing for granted where so much was at stake, and after a serious consultation, it was decided to let matters take their course, on the surface, then to act when the proper time came 'round."

"The scheme agreed upon was to put a sure dose of deadly poison in the coffee, which could be easily enough contrived

since we took turns in preparing the general meals, and that was the chums' week on duty."

"Well, the hour came, at last! We knew the coffee had been doped, unless the plotters had suddenly weakened, but we were ready for the test."

"Neither of those two came to table! Neither of them cared for a bite, or even for a cup of coffee! And when we insisted on their drinking at least *one* cupful apiece, they showed fight!"

"Self-convicted!"

"Just that," gravely assented the mayor, his tones cold and firm, although his face showed an unusual degree of pallor. "But we were not satisfied with so much, and overpowering them before they could do any serious harm, we bluntly charged them with the meditated crime."

"Which they denied, of course?"

"Of course. We looked for no less, and had prepared for just that. If innocent, they had *not* put poison in the coffee. If the coffee *hadn't* been doped, one cupful apiece certainly could do them no serious harm."

Ransom Eldridge spoke slowly, almost like an automaton. Don Darling felt a cold shiver creep along his spinal column, and more to relieve this "creepy" sensation, asked:

"Did they stand the test, then?"

"We had agreed in secret council not to take so much as a single step without due deliberation," said the mayor, still delaying the finale, like one who, even after that lapse of time, finds it a very difficult point to pass. "And so—we sat in cool, calm, impartial judgment over the two prisoners."

"The member who had discovered the plot, gave in his testimony. Some of the others bore witness to the covert threats let drop by the accused, from time to time. And then they were called upon to plead to the indictment drawn up against them."

"They swore 'twas all lies! That they had never given a thought to harm any one of the company, much less to murdering them all, by poison!"

"When asked why they refused to drink the coffee which no hands save their own had prepared, they swore that they feared some of us had introduced the drug, to put them out of the way! That 'twas all an atrocious plot to rob them of even their pitiful share in the mine they had discovered."

"We listened to all they could offer in self-defense, then went into secret session. Our verdict was—*guilty*!"

CHAPTER X.

THE CURSES COME HOME.

"It could not well be anything else, from the evidence," gravely said the Dandy from Denver.

"Such was our judgment, reached after long and painful deliberation, sir," was the sober response. "And then our verdict was delivered to the accused, by—by the one elected to preside over all."

"The prisoners were sentenced to drink each a full cup of the same coffee they had prepared for us. If innocent, they could come to no harm, and as recompense for the awful wrong we had done them, we agreed to abandon all claims on the Climax, in their favor."

"That was far more generous—excuse me, please!"

"It was what the member elected as judge insisted upon before he would accept the office. If guilty, the proviso would be null and void, and if innocent—well, *we* could not, for bare shame's sake, remain partners with the men we had injured so terribly by our suspicions!"

Ransom Eldridge paused to moisten his dry lips with the tip of his tongue, and the Denver Detective could not help seeing how difficult a tale the mayor had forced himself to begin.

Still, it was too late now to break off without saying more, and the narrator soon picked up the thread he had let drop.

"The prisoners refused to accept that verdict, and so—it was an ugly bit of work!" with a shudder. "And so—the coffee was

forced down their throats! And, drawing off a bit, leaving them still in bonds, we waited for the result!

"That was not long in showing itself, for the dose had been made of cruel potency. The symptoms indicated strychnine, for which we were already prepared. We had several bottles of that in camp. For wolves, not for human beings, though!"

Another shiver, another brief pause, then a more rapid resumption.

"One of the poor devils fell into a heavy stupor after his first spasmodic fit, never uttering a word after the dose was forced down his throat. But his mate—from first to last he raved and cursed and threatened! from start to finish he swore by all the powers of Heaven and of hell, that he would have revenge on one and all of us for murdering him thus!"

"He called it murder, then?"

"Yes, even in the same breath that he admitted his own guilt!" came the swift response from the mayor. "And then—I can hear him, even now! And then—he swore he'd come back to wreak vengeance upon us one and all, even if he had to kill Satan in order to get free from Tophet long enough to make his vow good!"

Again the mayor broke off his recital, and again Don Darling broke the silence after it had lasted nearly a minute:

"And the end was—what?"

"They both—died!"

Eldridge left his chair and procured a decanter of liquor. He filled a glass for his guest, then poured another full for himself, tossing the fiery poison off as though it had been so much limpid water.

"It's not often I do the likes of that, you understand, Mr. Darling," he said, apologetically, placing glass and decanter on the table between them, then resuming his seat. "But this is the first time I've even tried to recall that awful day to another in its entirety. And so—can you really blame me, sir?"

"I'd come nearer faulting you if you could tell it all without a show of emotion," bluntly declared the Denver Detective. "And yet, so far as I can judge from this distance, you acted with no more than justice."

Ransom Eldridge bowed his thanks, his somber face brightening a bit as though he found such words very grateful to hear, just now.

"There was nothing else we *could* do, as I looked at it *then*, as I regard it *now*, certainly in cold blood after all these years!"

"This was an almost entirely unorganized territory, then. There was no law, no courts, no one duly authorized to pronounce—but, why say more on that point?"

"No use at all," readily assented the detective. "It was bare justice, of course. And yet—I can understand how that poor devil felt like covering you all with his dying curses!"

Don Darling had strong nerves, but that picture had been drawn with such terribly realistic touches that he shuddered and—did he draw back with actual repugnance?

Ransom Eldridge so interpreted his motion, and a light as of fire leaped into his big eyes, while his voice grew stern and even menacing as he poured forth the words:

"Have you forgotten, so soon? Don't I tell you we were clean out of civilization? There was no law, no justice, no punishment save that dictated by men who were absolutely forced to kill, in order to live!"

"What safeguard could we have, save fighting fire with fire? And if we took the law into our own hands—if we administered the law of the mountains—can you fault us for so acting?"

"No, but—*poison!*" muttered Darling, shivering afresh. "That is no fitting death even for a sheep-killing cur, caught in the very act!"

"'Twas the very death they deliberately chose for nine of us," came the stern retort. "We were all unsuspecting them of evil thoughts up to that very hour when they decided just when and how we should perish. We paraded with them. We would have offered our very lives in their defense had the occasion arose. And yet—well, 'twas *two* lives, or the lives of *nine* men!"

"Those two lives were justly forfeited, I

admit, and I'd never say so much as one word against their punishment had you—"

Ransom Eldridge reached forth a hand and lightly touched an arm. A faint smile crept into his strong face, and when he spoke again it was with greatly mellowed tones:

"I understand you, far better than you comprehend me, as yet, Mr. Darling," he said, gravely. "I told you they made the potion cruelly strong, and had they not persisted in swearing to their perfect freedom from all thought of evil, we might not have forced the coffee down their throats against their will."

"But—when the poison began to show its workings—well, we fell to and did all we could to save their lives!"

"If you'd only let fall a hint—"

"Why should I?" with a curious smile. "We had not granted them absolution for their sin. It was merely a different death we wished to give them. I'll not lie about it, even to win *your* favor, sir!"

Somehow Don Darling found it difficult to say more, just then. Without exactly understanding how it had been brought about, he felt himself placed very much in the wrong!

Although Ransom Eldridge was far too shrewd an observer to mistake the advantage he had gained, he let the opportunity pass, and by so doing improved it best!

"We did all we could to save their lives, sir, but failed. The poison was too strong for our ordinary remedies, and both men died. One never uttered a word after his first fit, passing away like some literally dumb brute."

"The other—he who cursed us all so horribly for murdering him, even while he admitted that the poison had been prepared for us—he died, likewise, but with his latest breath he called down vengeance upon our heads. And—he called upon a woman to *wreak that vengeance!*"

Slowly, distinctly came these final words, as though the speaker meant to leave no possible room for doubt as to their full meaning.

A brief silence followed, during which the mayor seemed trying to read the Denver Detective's thoughts, through his pale face; but presently Eldridge resumed the thread of his narrative.

"They received a decent burial, when nothing more remained for us to give them. And then, gathered in council together, the nine survivors of the original company solemnly renewed the old agreement, then pledged ourselves under the most impressive oaths we could devise—"

"First, to never reveal by what manner those two men came by their deaths, without the free consent of each and every survivor was first secured."

"Second, to share and share alike in the fruits of the Climax, with the further understanding that, in case any one or more of the company now reorganized should wish to sell his share, or should die while still in good standing as one of the Silver League, the first chance should be given his mates."

"This, in brief, is the law under which the Climax has been run from that day to this, Mr. Darling. We have no quotations on stock, remember. No person outside of the Silver League knows at what figures we hold the shares of stock, or can give anything more than a vague guess at the value of one-ninth of the mine, such as poor Pike Hunter died possessed of."

"That surely must leak out when his share in the property is disposed of, though?" half asserted the detective.

"Not so, sir. His share will be taken by some of us, or else divided up between a number of the League. His legal heirs may know how much *money* comes to their hands, but that is all."

Darling said nothing further, and after waiting a few moments to give time for questioning, in case any was thought essential, the mayor resumed his narrative.

"It would take all the rest of the night, Darling, to properly explain how we worked up the boom which has grown into Chloride City," he declared, with a touch of pride in both face and tones. "Enough for now that we had the Climax in readiness for actual work long before the strike got wind, and foreseeing that a big rush would surely follow on the heels of that announcement,

we made sure of the most promising claims, on the line, as indicated by our developments."

"When all was in readiness, we told of the new discovery, backing up our tales with a display of almost marvelously rich specimens. That was enough, and to spare! In less than a week, thousands of fortune-seekers were here, each and every one confidently anticipating an independent fortune!"

"Of course the many failed, where a few met with moderate success; but that is ever the case. The Climax alone would justify a town, with crusher, reduction works, etc., to say nothing of our other claims."

"To cut it still shorter, the town came, and so did the necessary works, with ample machinery, as you can see for yourself. And now—only for those awful curses and their fruits, we'd have been happy as is often given to mortal beings to feel!"

"Then you think—"

"Wait yet a little longer, please," with a swift gesture of repression. "Was it those curses coming home? I've tried to beat back that horrible thought, only to have it return with double force! If not—but let me tell you, Darling!"

"Blows, heavy, unseen, not to be guarded against, began falling, and—all *smiting some member of the Silver League!*"

"Passing by the many minor happenings which, no doubt, you could by patience trace back to purely natural causes, I'll begin with—Owen Yarwood."

"He was found lying on the broad of his back, early one morning, cold and already stiffening in death!"

"What killed him?"

"What killed Pike Hunter this day?" almost sharply retorted the mayor, his brown eyes glowing redly under the lamp-light. "A bullet had passed through Owen Yarwood's heart, striking him in front. That was the only mark visible, save a slight scalp-wound caused by his head striking a stone when he fell, *dead!*"

"And the bullet? Did it resemble those you tested to-night?"

"We took it for an ordinary 32 caliber, then. Remember, sir, we had nothing to stir our suspicions deeper, at that time. And so—we put poor Owen in a deep lot on the hillside, then hunted for his assassin."

"Hunted, not found, bear in mind!"

The detective nodded his comprehension, and Eldridge continued:

"Next, and still within that month, the second death-blow fell! It caught our 'Wild Irishman,' Mike Mahoney, and we could well have spared a better man—poor Irish!"

"He was shot, like the other?"

"No. A knife had been driven through his heart, the blow plainly coming from behind, the point entering close to the collar-bone, on the right side, then ranging downward and to the left. 'Twas a deftly delivered stroke, and when the narrow hole was measured, and some one recalled how partial the foreigners—of the Mediterranean Isles, for example—are to that stroke—"

"You think a Sicilian killed Mahoney, then?"

"Wait, please! That was the second blow. Then David Ashmole, another good lad, disappeared without word or warning! And now—to-day—you saw the last delivered death-stroke, when Pike Hunter was slain!"

There followed a brief silence, then Darling quietly asked:

"What sort of a man was this David Ashmole, Mr. Eldridge?"

CHAPTER XI.

THE MASKED MYSTERY.

QUIETLY, evenly as this query was put, it was by no means a difficult matter to divine the suspicion which lay back of the words.

Very possibly Ransom Eldridge had expected something of the sort, since he betrayed neither curiosity nor surprise. And, shaking his head negatively, the mayor made answer:

"As white a lad as ever drew the breath of life, Mr. Darling."

"How long did you live with those two chums before finding them out, if I may ask?"

The elder man smiled faintly as he acknowledged the hit, but still he declined to admit that possibility, even for a moment.

"I know what you're hinting at, Darling, but you're wrong. David Ashmole had nothing whatever to do with those killings. I say this, almost as readily as I would answer for my own freedom from guilt!"

"Yet you admit that Ashmole disappeared, without leaving any trace behind him," persisted the detective.

"Just as I've already told you, yes."

"It's not so easy to make a full grown man vanish from everybody as that would appear, Mr. Eldridge. A corpse is one of the hardest things on earth to dispose of, without leaving some clue behind. And in this case—of course, granting that Ashmole was innocent, you lay his disappearance to the same agency which laid your other mates low?"

The mayor bowed in the affirmative, that faint smile still visible.

"Was any effort made to cover up those two murders? From what you have said, I rather inferred the secret slayer chose time and place with a view to making as horrible an impression as possible."

"And succeeded, too!"

"There you feel the point I'm trying to make, then," quickly added the Denver Detective. "If David Ashmole had come to his death by the same agency which doomed his two mates to a bloody ending, the parallel would almost surely have been carried out to the end."

"If it was thought to strike still deeper terror to the souls of his friends and partners by spiriting him away, surely some sign would have been left to tell those survivors whom they had to charge with yet another blow?"

Ransom Eldridge listened to this close argument in grave silence, for he felt its purely logical force. Still, the inference did not agree with the one he had drawn, and he offered his reasons.

"You reason carefully, Mr. Darling, and your argument proves that you have entered into the case with a brain as well as a body; but, all the same, I'm bound to say that I must differ with your conclusions, in toto."

"You think Ashmole was murdered and his body concealed, then?"

"No, sir. I believe David Ashmole is alive and well to this very day!" came the swift assertion.

"Yet you deny that he has or had any hand in these crimes?"

"For which I am ready to offer my reasons, sir," with another faint smile as he squarely encountered that keen gaze. "As I said a bit ago, a whiter lad than Dave Ashmole never drew breath the of life. But—of course he was not perfect, since he was human!"

"Dave was honest as day, yet he was covetous as a miser. He'd risk his life in defense of a friend without stopping to take thought, yet he'd nearly break his neck fleeing from a much slighter peril which menaced only himself. Yet I consider the strongest of all his weaknesses was his intense superstition!"

Don Darling gave a little stir of dawning comprehension, now, but as he uttered no word, the mayor continued:

"I know that Ashmole was terribly frightened by the killing of Owen Yarwood, and that this terror was added to by the death of Mahoney. I feel sure that nothing less powerful than his great longing for unlimited wealth kept him from throwing up his interest in the Climax when that first awful blow fell. When the second one came—that did cap the climax!"

"He vanished, scared away, as I firmly believe."

"And his interest in the mine?"

"Took that with him, be sure!" with a brief laugh. "He gave his interests in charge of a Denver law firm, and they have collected his share of the mine earnings ever since, under a power of attorney!"

"It was regular, of course?" hinted the detective.

"Perfectly regular, you may be sure," came the instant response. "Of course that was our first care."

"Then it surely ought not to be difficult finding Ashmole?"

"Not difficult, but simply impossible!"

Didn't we try? Didn't we all unite in an appeal to our old friend to make his hiding-place known to us? But no word, no sign came from him, nor could we induce his lawyers to enlighten us further."

"Yet you never turned suspicion his way, you say?"

"Because we knew the man too thoroughly, I repeat."

There was a brief pause, Eldridge evidently deemed he had said it all in that summing up, and the detective was shrewd enough to realize the futility of arguing that point further.

"Knowing the man so intimately, of course you are a better judge than I can lay claim to being," he admitted, presently. "Still, some one dealt those blows, and if not David Ashmole, who was it?"

There was a short pause, during which Ransom Eldridge slowly passed a hand across his wrinkled forehead, time and time again, like one seeking to clear a troubled brain. But then, looking up to meet those brown eyes squarely, he spoke:

"We were cursed in the name of a woman. We were threatened with terrible retribution, also in the name of a woman. That miserable wretch died with the name of a woman upon his lips. You follow me, sir?"

"You believe a woman is trying to carry out those threats?"

"I surely do believe just that!"

"You all pledged yourselves to complete secrecy, didn't you?"

"We did, and that oath was taken in perfect good faith, of course."

"Then how did that woman named by the dying poisoner ever learn of his threats in her name?"

"That forms part of the puzzle which I am trying to hope you will solve," frankly admitted the mayor, without trying to gloss over the one weak point in the theory he certainly had shaped for himself. "I'm simply telling you what I know to be facts, and adding my firm belief to that."

"I beg your pardon. Please go on," quietly said the detective.

"A strange woman came here to Chloride City, only a short time before the first link in our Silver League was broken by a violent death. That woman kept aloof from all save one man: her close confederate. She never gave another mortal so much as a glimpse of her face, but wore a cunning mask both night and day."

"Why? What good reasons had she for remaining a masked mystery?"

"Let us hear your explanation, first," gravely said Darling.

"They are briefly spoken, Mr. Darling! Because she had resolved to get full possession of the Climax Mine, and at the same time revenge the death of those who first discovered the lode!"

"There still remains the point I touched upon a bit ago," gravely said the man from Denver. "How could this masked mystery, as you term the woman, have learned of that punishment? Of course you none of you told the full story?"

"No, but—Ashmole might have hinted at a ghostly message," with a faint smile. "but I can merely admit that the solution lies beyond my powers. Of course 'twould be easy for such a woman to learn that the two men died; we never attempted to conceal so much, of course!"

"You are speaking of the woman you took me to see this evening, of course?"

"Madam Silver, yes. I firmly believe she is the source of all the bitter black trouble which has come upon us, as a League!"

"You have collected evidence pointing that way, then?"

"Well, for one thing, I know that the Silver Queen, through her ally, Fred Freestone, is very anxious to secure one or more shares in the Climax."

"Because the property is paying more than handsome dividends, maybe."

This quiet suggestion seemed to irritate the mayor past endurance, for he gave an impatient gesture, and his voice grew harsher as he abruptly demanded:

"Are you pleading her cause, then? Are you acting as Madam Silver's advocate, Mr. Darling?"

"Not at all, Mr. Eldridge. I merely wish to view all points, to take an honest look at

both sides of the shield before deciding as to its color or the motto it bears," came the instant response.

"If the woman is wholly innocent—if she is here with honest motives—why maintain such careful secrecy?"

"May it not be with a view to drawing more custom to both bar and card-tables, through stirring the public curiosity, Mr. Eldridge?"

The mayor gave another impatient gesture, yet he could not deny the perfect plausibility of that suggestion. It was nothing more than had been done time and time again, even within his own knowledge, although the advertising whimsey had taken other shapes than this.

"Mind you, Mr. Eldridge," the Denver detective said, after a brief pause. "I am not saying that you are wholly wrong in charging this masked mystery with being at the bottom of all your trouble. For one thing, I have reached the ground too lately to form more than a shadowy opinion, one way or the other."

"And I can only repeat my firm belief: Madam Silver killed my mates, from Owen Yarwood to Pike Hunter!" almost doggedly declared the mayor!

"You have more positive proofs implicating her, then?"

"I'm not sure you would call them *proofs*," slowly answered the elder man. "But I can tell you *this* much, right now: Madam Silver could have fired each one of those five shots: those which laid Yarwood and Hunter low, as well as the three missiles which searched so keenly for my own heart!"

"To-night—"

"You remember how she left the gambling-hall? She could easily have left the Silver Horn, in disguise, to intercept us, Darling!"

"I know. But could she have dealt the blow that killed your other mate?"

"The 'Wild Irishman'? Why not? Ask any practical surgeon, and he will tell you that even a weak-armed woman might bury a ten-inch blade to the very hilt if *that* precise point was selected," declared the mayor, touching himself with a white finger-tip at the place meant.

"It may be. I'm not so well posted on such facts as I ought, perhaps," gravely admitted the detective; then adding the query: "But how about Pike Hunter to-day?"

"What do you mean, Darling?"

"It was a still, clear day, you remember, and the town seemed pretty well astir just then."

"It usually is when the stage is due. But you mean something more than that, of course?"

"You stated not long ago, that this Madam Silver was never seen by mortal being, unless it might be her ally, Fred Freestone, without her mask. Do you mean by this that she wears it in the street, as well as at the faro-table?"

"Whenever she is seen abroad, yes!"

"And you admit that the Silver Queen is a source of constant curiosity here in Chloride?"

"That goes without saying, sir," impatiently, yet contriving to hold his temper under subjection for the time being.

"Sure if slow is a very good motto for a detective to sail under, my dear sir," easily said the man from Denver, reading his employer correctly. "But now I'm getting down to bed-rock, as you call it."

"If the person you term Madam Silver was abroad at the time Pike Hunter met his doom, and near enough to the front of the hotel to fire that death-shot, surely she would have been seen by some one among that crowd? And, if armed with either rifle or pistol—"

Until now Ransom Eldridge had listened with forced patience, but at this juncture he cut in, quickly:

"Stop right there, Mr. Darling, please! Now—did you notice just where the Silver Horn stood to-night?"

"I don't—explain your meaning a bit more clearly, please."

"I'll do that, sir," with a short, metallic laugh. "I see that you don't catch on, even yet, but you surely will when I tell you that the Silver Horn stands diagonally opposite The Grand!"

Don Darling gave a little start at this an-

nouncement, for he at once caught the point Eldridge was trying to make. If true, and he had no reason to think otherwise, that matter of locality would explain away the principal difficulty he had noted.

"Then you think?" he began, slowly.

"The Silver Horn is a two-story building. What's to hinder a shot coming from one of those up-stair windows, striking down a man who stood where Pike Hunter found his death, this day?"

CHAPTER XII.

A SHADOW OF THE NIGHT.

THAT swift statement made his meaning perfectly clear to the listening detective, and he had no further questions to ask, concerning that particular point.

On his part, Mayor Eldridge seemed content to rest his case there.

If not proof positive, he had proven the possibility of that death-shot coming from the Silver Queen.

His silence told the detective that the mayor had produced his strongest proof, or, at least, that he had brought forward all that he was ready to lay bare at so early an hour of their acquaintance.

A more sensitive man might have chafed under such caution, but not so the man from Denver. He had seen and heard enough since entering Chloride City to keep his brain busy for hours, even should nothing more come to the surface to demand consideration.

Mayor Eldridge was the first to break that silence.

"You shall take a look for yourself in the morning, Mr. Darling. You will find that I have spoken nothing more than the exact truth.

"There are two windows in the upper story of the Silver Horn, both looking out upon the street. Diagonally opposite stands the hotel, where the stage makes its first regular stop, and where you became mixed in an unfortunate altercation with Pike Hunter.

"Both of those upper windows are kept curtained, as a rule; any one in Chloride can tell you *that* much! And—a cool, skillful shot could easily pick off a man at that range!"

"But the flash, smoke, report?"

"All might have passed unnoticed during that excitement. Then, too, since the nitro powders have come to the front, all those items have been reduced to a minimum."

It was evident the mayor had given that mystery abundant thought, his answers came so promptly and sounded so reasonable. If refuted at all, it would require a more careful study than the Denver Detective had as yet been able to give the affair.

After another brief pause, Don Darling spoke up:

"I'll take hold of the case, Mr. Eldridge, and as in duty bound I'll do my level best to solve the mystery and bring the guilty one to justice."

"I thank you for that, sir!"

"No need," with a fleeting smile. "In these matter-of-fact days a gentleman hardly thinks it necessary to give his servant thanks for merely performing his duty to the best of his ability."

"But this is no matter-of-fact case, you understand!" earnestly declared the mayor, his right hand crossing over to grip that of the detective. "If you really *do* clear up this awful mystery, 'tisn't *money alone* that can make you and the Silver League quits!"

Don Darling returned that ardent grip, but even while smiling into that strong, earnest face, he gravely uttered:

"As I said, I'll do my duty to the extent of my ability, sir, but I can't help regretting the words you spoke back there on the hotel steps, this evening!"

"About your being a detective, of course?"

"Yes. I'd have a far better chance of solving this enigma if you hadn't publicly announced the object which brought me to Chloride."

Darling frowned a bit as he uttered the words, but Eldridge gave a low, odd chuckle which brought a flush to the cheeks of the detective.

"You feel decidedly more like laughing over it than I do, Mr. Eldridge," he said, rather tartly.

"I beg your pardon, Darling, but I really couldn't help it," declared the other, regaining his composure with an evident effort. "It just struck me what a comical cartoon your face would have made when I gave the crowd that off-hand introduction to you!"

"Call it 'disgust,' and the whole would express my sentiments passing well," coldly retorted the younger man, pushing back his chair as though about to take his departure.

"Wait a moment longer, please," swiftly cut in his host, dropping all signs of bantering, both face and voice growing grave and full of earnestness once more as he added:

"I feel now, as I felt then, Darling, that Madam Silver is plenty shrewd enough to have ferreted out your real profession without any assistance on my part; but—"

"Why go to so much extra trouble, then?" came the blunt query.

"I promised to explain, at the time, and I'm ready to do so now, if you will only permit me," coldly asserted the mayor.

Don Darling settled back in his seat, with an air of grim resignation while waiting for the promised explanation.

It was not so easy to forgive this rash step, since he had carefully prepared the *role* he was to play as the "Dandy from Denver" in this half civilized mining-town, while studying the death-riddle which had brought him to Chloride City.

"I don't believe I'm actually a coward, Mr. Darling," gravely spoke his present employer. "I've held my end level in more than one rough bit of work, as all men must who follow a life the one I have led since early manhood.

"But, honestly, I'm beginning to grow nervous over this strange affair! I've more than once caught myself jumping at fancied sounds, and only came to myself when I was all in a cold sweat."

"I think I can comprehend that much, Mr. Eldridge."

"Then I needn't dwell upon the point. It isn't the most agreeable food for thought, and hardly more pleasant to talk about, even to one who is surely a friend," frankly admitted the mayor.

"Well, then, bearing in mind what I have already told you," with a slight nod toward the desk where that shot-dented shirt of mail was lying, "it will hardly surprise you when I add that I feel the chances are strongly in favor of my being killed before this black riddle is safely read!"

"You oughtn't to yield to such thoughts, sir."

"How easily spoken!" ejaculated the mayor, with one of his short, peculiar laughs that held so little merriment in their notes. "But, let it pass. The fact is that *I do* feel that way, and I believe it is facts gentlemen of your profession are fondest of?"

Don Darling bowed in silence. He frowned a bit, too. Why did this man beat about the edges of the bush so persistently? Was he afraid of laying bare the whole truth?

"I thought I might as well reap the credit myself, you understand, and so made that public announcement. The secret slayer would surely find out what your arrival meant, and my announcement would put the enemy on guard. With a regular detective on the scene, surely they would not take such long chances!"

Don Darling caught the point being made, but bluntly said:

"Yet you were shot at only a few hours later, while actually in my company! A precious safeguard, truly! Why, man, dear, we were walking arm in arm when the attempt was made against your life!"

"On the chance of blocking my story of the plot to you, beyond all reasonable doubt!" positively declared Mayor Eldridge. "With *my* tongue chained for all time, who else could so fully post you?"

There was a pause, then, during which both men seemed busily thinking over the situation.

If Don Darling was not entirely satisfied with the explanation given him by his employer, he knew that further reproach was worse than useless. The harm was done, and he must make the best of the situation, altering his plans to suit the changed conditions.

Presently he spoke again:

"Of course I am hardly expected to make the decision, one way or the other, without

taking time to look deeper into the case, Mr. Eldridge. Still, from an off-hand point of view, I'd sooner bank on that last shot having been fired by the old man, rather than the Silver Queen."

"I'll have to differ from you as to that, sir."

"It's your privilege, of course. May I ask who and what he is?"

"Reuben Reeves by name, hunter, fisherman, trapper, just as circumstances justify," came the prompt response. "I take him to be one of the Kit Carson breed; a relic of days dead and gone by forever."

"His character is good, then?"

"The worst I ever heard brought against the old man is that he is surly and even dangerous whenever he drinks too freely."

"Does *that* happen with any degree of frequency?"

"Very rarely, in fact. And since he settled down only a little ways outside of town, on a truck-patch, I can't recall his ever getting drunk. It's his daughter who keeps him sober, I reckon."

"He has a daughter, then?"

"Yes. They live together, alone. Her name is Ethel, I believe. But you're widely astray if you connect old Reeves with these killings. *He* never took part in either of them, I feel quite positive!"

"Still, it is strange that he failed to see aught of the one who fired that shot at you, this evening," thoughtfully observed the detective, lowering his lids with a perplexed frown. "Whoever it was, must have fled *that* way, else *we'd* surely have caught at least a glimpse of him."

"Or of *her*," emphasized the mayor.

"Still, is it any more strange than that no one saw or heard aught of the person who shot Pike Hunter, in broad daylight, and in the midst of a crowd of his friends?"

It was a great, almost an appalling mystery, and Don Darling silently admitted as much. Yet he did not despair of solving the riddle, give him time and opportunity.

Just then Mayor Eldridge yawned, as though involuntarily, and so abruptly that his hand could not rise swiftly enough to mask that wide opening.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Darling, but there is a heap of work ahead for both of us, to-morrow, and I reckon *we'd* better be thinking of bed."

The detective instantly abandoned his chair, picking up his hat as he did so, showing a slight touch of confusion as he apologized for keeping the mayor up so long; but when he would have beaten a retreat, Ransom Eldridge quickly objected.

"Not much you'll not!" he bluntly declared, cutting those words short. "I told my factotum—Dick Lane—to prepare room and bed for a guest. *You're* that guest, my dear fellow, so say no more about it."

Readily seeing that the mayor meant to have his way in this respect, the Denver Detective yielded that point, and was shown up-stairs by his hospitable host, who only left the chamber when fully assured nothing further could be done for his comfort, by Darling.

A single glance at the window told the detective he was located at the front of the house, and as the moon was still shining brightly, and the window without wooden shutters, he took a comprehensive glance around the cozy chamber to fairly localize himself, then blew out the light.

A glance at the dial of his watch had told him the hour was hardly as late as he had expected to find, but even if it had been otherwise, Don Darling felt preciously little inclined for sleep, just then.

Silently lifting the sash, Darling moved a chair noiselessly to the window, sitting there with the faint, cool night breeze just touching his face as it floated past the house front.

He had ample food for thought, although he had spent so few hours within the limits of Chloride City.

Although the moon was shining brightly, the front of the building was cast into darkness, thanks to its frontage, and the mellow light barely touched the outer portion of the low railing which surmounted the piazza-roof just below his window.

Sitting there, then, with no risk of attracting attention in case any belated citizen should chance to glance his way in passing, Don Darling gave himself up to brooding

over the tragedy which he had witnessed, and those others of which he had been told.

Who could have fired that silent, smokeless shot? Who could have followed this assassination up so closely with a hardly less audacious attempt upon the life of the chief of the Silver League?

The arguments made by Major Eldridge vividly passed in mental review, but as he recalled that statuesque figure, clad from crown to sole in dull yet lustrous cloth of silver, he could not believe the woman guilty as sworn!

And then—the Denver Detective gave a slight start, his confused thoughts taking to instant flight, leaving him once more the trained detective, with every sense and every nerve ready for swift action in case the necessity arose.

"A shadow! It looked like a shadow, but—it moved like a—ha! Again! And—a woman, by the holies!"

Although below his breath, there was powerful emphasis placed upon those words, and leaning a little forward, Don Darling watched while waiting for that living shadow of the night to come more distinctly within his field of vision.

Then—the wished-for took place! The shadow came a little past the edge of the moonlight, looking up at the house, and—

"Is it the Silver Queen?" Don Darling asked himself, just then.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHADOWING THE SHADOWS.

It came to the Denver Detective almost like a revelation, for certainly there was naught in the general appearance of that phantom-like shape to recall the presiding deity of the Silver Horn faro-table, unless it was that more or less vague instinct which is apt to volunteer its services when least expected.

He could not be positive that the moving shadow was even of the feminine gender, for whatever it might ultimately prove to be, the shadow quickly drew back out of the moonlight, and seemed to vanish into thin air.

Don Darling gave a muttered sound of disappointment, but that feeling did not last many moments. As his eyes accommodated themselves to the change, he once more distinguished that silent shape, standing well back in the shade, apparently gazing intently in his direction.

"Playing spy, but what for?" the detective asked himself. "For whose benefit? On my account, or that of the mayor?"

That was a point more readily presented than solved, bearing in mind what had taken place since the arrival of the stage.

"If he hadn't been so infernally candid!"

Don Darling had not entirely reconciled himself to the cool move made by Ransom Eldridge, as yet. At nearly every turn that hasty introduction gave signs of bothering his work, and even now it left him undecided as to what might prove an important bit of knowledge.

Was this feminine shadow drawn to this spot by thoughts of Mayor Eldridge, or was it trying to gather points concerning the detective who had come from the Queen City of the Plains with the avowed purpose of clearing up that death-mystery?

If a woman, as that brief view in the light of the moon had nearly convinced him, what woman? Who could it be save she who was locally known as the Silver Queen?

"And if Madam Silver—wonder did she fetch her gun?"

Almost involuntarily this thought flashed across the detective's brain, and from that instant of time his decision was taken.

Rising to his feet, he noiselessly swung the chair aside, then stood for a brief space in doubt.

"Shall I let him know? If abed and asleep—too risky! She might be gone before I could get him afoot, and then—which way best?"

The last words applied to himself, for Don Darling had determined to play spy upon that shadow, if only in hopes of learning its identity beyond the possibility of a doubt. The next question was, which way had he better turn?

He recalled how Ransom Eldridge had bolted the front door, and knowing as he now did what powerful cause the mayor had

to rigidly guard his life, it was easy to believe that still other precautions might have been taken to render a noiseless passage in or out impracticable for one not entirely in the secret of those defenses.

"Of course I could explain, if he wasn't too mighty sudden on trigger," mentally said the detective. "But that would take time, and—it begins to look as though I wouldn't have any too much of that, sure!"

A movement by that shadow led to this grim conclusion, and without debating the question further, Don Darling silently slipped through the open window, trusting his weight upon the roof of the front porch.

As heretofore stated, the front of the building was cast into shadow by the position of the moon, and the clearness of the light beyond only served to render that shadow the denser by contrast.

There was really little fear of his being discovered by even the keenest of eyes from such a distance, but Don Darling took no unnecessary chances, and slipped along the front of the house for the end of that gently sloping roof which was cast into deepest shade.

Once at that end, it was easy for the agile detective to swing himself over the low railing to the ground, crouching where he alighted until he could make sure that suspicious shadow had not taken the alarm through any of his movements.

"Still on deck!" the Dandy from Denver muttered as he made out that vague shape, occupying the same spot where he had spotted it before leaving his chamber. "Well, play I am, too!"

Since he had closely marked the lay of the ground before taking his first step on this nocturnal adventure, the detective was at no loss how to act now, and making the best possible use of the various bits of cover, he passed over the worst portion of the ground before his object of interest materially altered its pose.

Even that change of position threw the shrewd detective back but a few moments, for, at the end of that time, he was crouching under snug cover from whence he could secure a fair view of the unknown.

It was a woman, as he had suspected almost from the first glimpse, and almost as certainly that woman was—

"Madam Silver, for ducats!"

Yet, if so, the faro priestess had donned a different disguise from the one which she had made famous to Chloride City; for her figure was dark-robed from crown to ankle, the covering falling in limp and curveless folds.

Still, Don Darling hardly doubted her identity, and this belief was strengthened by her actions almost immediately after he made the mental decision which has just been recorded.

The woman was facing that house, and suddenly throwing up a hand, she seemed shaking it menacingly toward the home of Ransom Eldridge; it might have been an oath her lips were silently registering!

Although standing within the shadow cast by one of the trees which the artistic taste of the mayor had left standing before his house, as that right hand flew up, the keen sight of the detective noted a dull grayish flash, and he told himself once more:

"The Silver Queen! Still en masque, for that's the sheen of her glove!"

Dropping her clinched hand, the woman turned away from that spot, followed by the gaze of the detective, too shrewd to risk premature discovery by leaving his covert too soon.

She had gone but a short distance when a low, quivering whistle came floating through the night, and as he saw her pause short off, Don Darling rose nearly erect, to win a better view of the quarter toward which the Unknown turned at that signal.

"For signal it surely was, and meant for her ears too!" mentally declared the interested spy, then catching his breath slightly as he noted a movement beyond.

A tall shape came into the clear moonlight, and as it hastened toward the motionless woman, Don Darling saw that the newcomer was a man, and from its extreme height, as well as its general make up, he had little difficulty in deciding just who that man was.

"Reuben Reeves, for big money! Now—friends, of course!" as he saw the woman move toward the man, like one who wishes to meet rather than avoid.

A low, barely perceptible sound came to his eagerly straining ears, as though one of the shadows had spoken, but the woman made a swift gesture, then motioned toward the house, and now that low hum died out.

"Easy as big print to read, even if I can't catch a word!" grimly muttered the detective playing spy. "If I could only invent a bit of a haze just now! I reckon 'twouldn't be all lost time, listening to those romantic parties!"

In the total absence of haze, fog, or other atmospheric cover, the Denver Detective determined to make the best of such as he could find at hand, but he had hardly laid out his safest line of advance, when the couple began slowly moving away from that locality.

For a brief space Darling's hopes sunk very low, for they moved in the direction of town; but shortly after, their course shifted, and plucking up courage the spy crept after them as closely as he dared risk.

It was not until the pair had fairly drawn outside of Chloride City that they came to an actual halt again, but when this did happen, they faced each other like persons meaning to talk or consult at their ease.

The Denver Detective had kept track of them without any especial difficulty, although a more unfavorable night for playing spy could hardly have been selected; but now he paused, giving a frown and a low growl of strong disgust.

The bushy top of a tall, slender-boled tree cast an almost circular shadow on a bare spot of ground, and the night-walkers had seen fit to select that precise place for their confab.

The shadow gave ample protection against discovery from distant eyes, and it would be well-nigh impossible for any chance wayfarer to come near enough to sight them there, without first attracting their notice, which warning would enable them to readily flit to still safer cover.

All this Don Darling took in with that preliminary glance, and this it was which gave him such vicious thoughts.

But he had not taken so much trouble to fail at the first balk, and only waiting to make sure the twain in whom he felt such a powerful interest just then really intended to pause there, he drew back and looked for a more favorable line of approach.

This was poor, at the best, but refusing to give up beaten, the Denver Detective laid his course as far as he could from that point, then stole forward with all the skill of an Indian stealing upon an armed victim.

Twice the detective was near enough to catch a low murmuring sound as those two persons talked together, but neither time was he within understanding range. He could see, he could even hear to a degree, but he could learn nothing of what they were talking over, and this was the information he prized highly enough to risk a shot for!

Having made his third shift, with no better success, and failing to see how he could possibly better that effort while the couple maintained their station, Don Darling settled down under cover, grimly awaiting the end, using his eyes for all they were worth, since his ears were of no avail under existing circumstances.

He knew now that the man was indeed he whom Ransom Eldridge had called Reuben Reeves, for that tall, peculiarly garbed shape could not be confounded with any other in Chloride City. And, almost as surely, the old hunter's present companion was she who passed as Madam Silver.

Any doubt on that point which might possibly have remained, was removed from Darling's mind by a repetition of the passionate gesture which had first confirmed his belief. As that arm went up, the dark covering fell back, and there was a dull, brief gleam as of silver cloth.

For fully half an hour the spy-detective was forced to crouch there under cover, straining his ears without the power to catch even a single sentence, although an occasional word did make itself heard; but not one of those isolated syllables gave him

more than a vague, unsatisfactory clue to the subject of their consultation.

"They are not quarreling, for one thing," Darling mentally recorded, for lack of more profitable occupation. "Not enemies, if not actual allies. *Are they that?* If not, why were they both shadowing the place? Why come together on signals? Score one!"

Better than nothing, no doubt, but how much less than he would reap could he only catch each sentence as it fell from those lips!

"Who knows? It might even solve this death-riddle!"

It was thoroughly disgusting, and the knowledge that he had done all any man could do to better the case, failed to console the ardent detective, and it was with some relief that he noted an action which promised at least a change of scene.

"Finished all they had to say, I reckon, but I'd better be in bed than out here—*Talk louder, confound you!*"

The cloaked shape was speaking, and in more distinct tones than any which had been used since Don Darling came upon the scene; yet even now he was unable to learn anything of value.

So far as he could make out, another rendezvous was being arranged, although he could not say whether that was to be here, or elsewhere, by day, or under cover of night.

The man muttered something in response, and then the cloaked figure turned and glided swiftly away, leaving Reuben Reeves still standing there in that circular shadow!

The detective bit his lip until the skin was broken, for this was an additional disappointment for which he was totally unprepared.

He had counted on a chance to trail that cloaked figure to its destination, and thus make sure his belief in its being Madam Silver was right or was wrong. But now—

"Get a hustle on, you lengthy idiot! Are you going to stand there until you take root?"

Reuben Reeves made no move, gazing after that cloaked shape which was already becoming blended with less substantial shadows as it moved toward town.

While he stood there, Don Darling could not follow that shape. Even to leave the frail shelter under which he was crouching, would be to invite discovery from that gaunt sentinel; and Reuben Reeves still carried his Winchester in the hollow of his left arm, with right hand resting close to the hammer!

"Be just like the old fool to shoot first and question after!" muttered the now thoroughly disgusted detective.

After a short space of time, possibly because that cloaked figure had now passed beyond his range of vision, the old hunter heaved an audible sigh, turning partly around and then slowly moving out of that small shadow.

Don Darling sunk closer to the ground, with one hand cautiously feeling for a pistol-butt, for it seemed to him that Reeves was heading directly for his place of hiding.

A chill crept over him at the thought. Not that the man from Denver was a coward, but it was easy to guess what swift action a man who had been reared as Reuben Reeves had, would take on stumbling over one who surely had been playing spy.

To be discovered meant shooting or being shot, and since he had no positive proof that Reeves was illegally engaged, Darling hardly knew which horn of the dilemma would prove the worst!

Before that discovery came, however, the veteran paused for another glance toward, then muttered loud enough for those keen ears to catch without much trouble:

"Good Lawd! Ef 'twas me, I'd heap sight ruther hev a starvin' she-painter campin' onto the trail o' me! Ef she'd kill—*why not?*"

A pause, then that abrupt question.

Without attempting to answer it aloud, Reuben Reeves turned and advanced at a brisker pace than before.

CHAPTER XIV.

HIDDEN HANDS AT WORK.

IF the old hunter had been expecting an espial, he could hardly have missed discov-

ering that crouching figure, for he passed close by the side of that straggling bush, and even had to alter his course a bit to escape an actual collision with it.

But the *denouement* was not to come after that fashion, and without even suspecting how narrowly he had escaped a dangerous meeting, the veteran pressed on through the moonlight.

Not until those Indian-like footfalls had died away from his ears, did Don Darling dare draw a full breath, but then, cresting his head and glancing over a shoulder as he lay, he caught sight of that tall form receding, and, resolved to make the best of what chance remained, he likewise got under motion.

"If I can't take goose, I'll have gander!" was his grimly-philosophic declaration. "Who knows? It may be all for the best—though I'm doubting *that* all over!"

The detective found it no very difficult matter to shadow the old hunter, for Reeves never once cast a glance behind him, but evidently without a thought of enemies or spies, he hurried on with long, easy, even strides which carried him swiftly over the ground.

"Not much like a bloody conspirator, for a fact!" concluded Don Darling after a few minutes of this sort of work. "And yet—so far as my present stock of light goes, it rests between the two: Reuben Reeves, or Madam Silver!"

That journey did not last very long, yet the Denver Detective had time enough to mentally run over the main points of what he had picked up since reaching Chloride City.

It was no easy matter to think that a woman—even one so nearly unsexed as it comes natural to deem a faro-dealer to be—could work such peculiarly atrocious and desperately audacious crimes as had marked the existence of the Silver League.

Still, Ransom Eldridge was in a position to see deeper into the actual facts than any mere outsider could, and he seemed firmly convinced that the Silver Queen had thrice done men to death.

And now, surely it *had* been Madam Silver with whom he saw the old hunter in friendly consultation?

"Don't *that* connect the pair, then? Don't *that* make him her confederate, almost beyond a doubt? And—could I force the truth out of him by tight pinching, I wonder?"

By the time he had progressed this far with his musings, Darling took note of a change in the landscape, and that recalled the words let fall by the mayor, concerning the present occupation of the old hunter.

This was "the truck patch," and yonder—a lighted window!

"Run to earth!" declared the detective, but hardly with triumph. "I'd rather 'twas almost any other place, since I've made a water-haul so far. I'd stand a better chance for playing even on the whole deal, then!"

Reuben Reeves kept straight ahead, like one who feels sure of his welcome, but Don Darling came to a halt where he had cover to blend his shape with in case the veteran should take a backward glance.

The path led across one corner of "the truck patch," the greater portion of which lay to the right, along a gentle slope, cleared from rocks and undergrowth, with only one or two small trees left standing.

Glancing across this tract in the moonlight, Darling saw a number of shallow ditches for irrigating purposes, and even with his interests turned so utterly in another direction, he could not help marveling a bit at the change which must have been wrought in this, an old trapper and Indian-fighter, before he could turn to gardening!

Waiting until the door of the cabin opened and closed after its owner, Don Darling stole cautiously forward, making a little circle to avail himself of better cover, but aiming for the window in the end of the mountain home through which gleamed the light of lamp or candle.

This fact recalled another memory, and the detective caught himself wondering whether the daughter spoken of by Mayor Eldridge made it a habit to sit up with a light as company every time her father was late in getting home?

"If so, and the old man's often out *this* late, reckon she's growing mighty lank and hollow-eyed by this!" grimly mused the spy, as he drew nearer the lighted window, then slowly lifted his head until his eyes could win a fair glance at that interior.

The man from Denver gave a start and barely managed to smother an ejaculation which might have aroused dangerous suspicions, for what he saw was so utterly different from what he had been imagining, an instant before.

Father and daughter were just drawing apart, as though they had been embracing each other, and as the girl turned, Don Darling caught a fair view of her face, as well as figure.

"Mighty lank and hollow-eyed," he had mentally decided, but this by no means answered to that description, and a more complete contrast between father and daughter could hardly be imagined.

Ethel Reeves was almost fairy-like as to size, although her figure was rounded enough to seem perfectly proportioned in every respect.

Her hair was jetty black, and curled profusely. Her eyes, large and lustrous as those of a yearling doe, admirably matched hair, and rich, healthy complexion.

So much Don Darling saw, and actually caught his breath with a gasp, so completely was he taken by surprise.

And, too, his cheeks flushed until they fairly tingled with a sense of shame at finding himself engaged in spying upon—bah!

He was here as a detective, and duty came before silly sentiment!

Just then Reeves said something, and the distinctness with which he caught those syllables, still further recalled Darling to his professional self; and creeping still closer to that window, he saw a portion of one lower pane had been broken out.

As he shifted his position, Ethel Reeves likewise altered hers, and now father and daughter sat side by side on a rude, home-made settle, talking together in lowered tones.

This did not appear to come about through a fear or expectation of being eavesdropped, but nothing more than their customary manner; still, it amounted to pretty much the same thing, so far as Don Darling was concerned.

He could not follow their talk with certainty, and dared not invite discovery by pressing face too close to that uncurtained window. If caught thus by the old Indian-fighter—well, only a footrace could avert a fight to the finish!

Thus restricted, the Denver Detective heard just enough to wish he might hear more! Enough to convince him that the speakers felt a powerful interest in Ransom Eldridge and his worldly affairs, yet not sufficient to enlighten him as to precisely why that interest was held.

After all, that tantalizing test did not last very long, for Ethel presently gave Reuben another hug and several kisses, then bade him good-night and passed out of the detective's view, through a door which no doubt opened into her chamber.

Left alone, Reeves filled his pipe and doubled himself up before the little fire which had been kept burning on the stone hearth, elbows on knees, and bony hands arching from chin to ears as he stared at the coals with their ashen coating.

Minute after minute passed away without the slightest change in that position, and feeling that he was not at all likely to learn aught further from that quarter, the shadow silently withdrew from his post beneath that window, and then faced toward Chloride City.

Although he had gleaned far less than he had hoped for, Darling was not entirely dissatisfied with the results of his night-escapade, and fell into deep thought as he moved toward the house under whose roof he had so unexpectedly found himself quartered.

Too deeply sunk in thought, as it proved; for, without noise enough to warn him of coming peril, Don Darling was assaulted from out a mass of shadow through which he was passing just then, and with gasping cry, the Denver Detective fell limply to the earth!

Stiff, chilled to the bone, his head throbbing fit to split wide open as he made the exertion, the Dandy from Denver lifted himself upon hands and knees, then, after a dizzy stare around him, added to that effort by staggering to his feet.

A brief spell of dizziness, then he felt better, and stared half-bewilderedly around the spot, at the same time instinctively feeling for his weapons and his valuables.

Nothing seemed to have been taken, at first, for his fingers were benumbed, but then he made the discovery that he had been robbed!

Weapons, watch, money, and—

"My note-book!" he ejaculated, as he vainly sought for that article in his breast. "Who turned the trick? And why?"

The absence of watch and money would seem to answer that with sufficient plainness, but Don Darling was far from satisfied with that solution. If merely a footpad, why take a book which contained only pen and pencil marks?

Seeing and hearing nothing of his assailants, and finding no bones had been broken, no wounds inflicted worse than a painful lump along his crown, Don Darling resumed his way, staggering a bit with dizziness, and with occasional fits of excruciating headache.

Still, he managed to reach the home of Ransom Eldridge, and feeling unprepared to stand a siege of close questioning, he regained his chamber by climbing up a post at an end of the porch, and thankful that he had done all this without raising an alarm, the detective sunk upon his bed, just as the gray of dawn began to lighten the eastern sky.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SILVER LEAGUE IN SESSION.

CONTRARY to his expectations, the Dandy from Denver fell asleep almost as soon as he stretched himself out on the bed, and when a summons came for him to rise and dress for the morning meal, albeit feeling lack of sufficient sleep, and a general "rocky" condition, he really found himself but little the worse for wear.

His dressing consisted in removing what he could of the soil marks gathered by his garments during that nocturnal espial, but when he took note of the blood which had trickled down from the hurt on his head, Don Darling concluded not to conceal his adventure as he had at first intended, but to make a confidant of his host.

His story was told while at table, and Ransom Eldridge betrayed a strong degree of interest from start to finish, while the questions he asked told how his thoughts were drifting.

They were mainly in relation to the cloaked figure, and when there remained nothing further to tell, there was a touch of grim satisfaction in his tones as he asked for Darling's opinion concerning Madam Silver, after this bit of personal experience.

An answer was given, but hardly a direct one. The detective was not yet ready to squarely face the issue, and really appeared to feel more uneasiness concerning the loss of his note-book than of aught else which was connected with that bit of adventure.

"If only money or money's worth had been taken, the answer would have been easy enough," he said, almost moodily. "But that—no mere footpad would have given it a second glance!"

"Unless he thought it was a pocketbook, or held money," suggested the mayor.

"Out of the question, sir. It was a memorandum-book, plain and simple, and even an idiot couldn't well mistake it for aught else!"

"Surely it held no dangerous secrets, Mr. Darling?"

"That depends pretty much on whose hands the book falls into," was the almost gruff answer. "But—drop it all, please!"

But little more was said while at table, but after leaving that for the room where so much had been told relating to the Silver League, Ransom Eldridge gravely touched upon that subject once more.

"I had a caller or two this morning before you came down, Mr. Darling, and we decided to bury poor Hunter this forenoon, if

all arrangements could be completed in time. You will attend, I presume?"

The detective bowed assent. Since he had become publicly identified with the Silver League, thanks to the canny caution of the mayor, he hardly had any excuse for declining.

After a few more words, which told of time and place and manner of conducting the ceremony, Darling took his leave of Eldridge for the time being, and experiencing no difficulty in finding the Express-office by following the directions given him, he secured his pair of gripsacks, and transferred them to The Grand.

Engaging a room here, the Dandy from Denver was enabled to renovate himself, thanks to the elaborate preparations which he had made beforehand to sustain that dudish character.

It did not take long after leaving his chamber in his fresh rig, to convince the detective that the mayor's rash introduction had made a sort of public character of him, for nods and winks and veiled whispers were indulged in by nearly every male citizen under whose eyes he chanced to pass that forenoon.

These were many, for the dead man was still at the hotel, and the funeral procession was to start from that place. This being so, The Grand naturally became the center of interest, thanks to the mysteriously tragic manner in which poor Pike Hunter had departed this life.

In spite of the general curiosity with which he was regarded, Don Darling was not intruded upon, nor did any of the citizens see fit to address him as they might any other new-comer. It was this difference, too, which made the detective feel most thoroughly how well his business was now known to all Chloride City.

There was little pomp or ceremony observed in paying the last rites to the murdered man. The surviving members of the Silver League had taken charge of all, as a matter of course, with their president, Mayor Eldridge, to lead the way and direct matters.

A prayer was read, a few words were spoken, a volunteer choir gave a brief song; then the plain coffin was lifted by the grave-faced mourners, Ransom Eldridge walking in front of them as the other members of the League bore their dead friend out to where a wagon was in waiting.

In silence the mayor took the detective's arm, and with the procession falling in behind them, the journey was made to the cemetery, where a red pit yawned for its prey.

The ceremonies here were still briefer than they had been at the hotel, consisting simply of a few words in turn from each member of the Silver League, led off by Ransom Eldridge. Following his example, each survivor solemnly pledged his time and energies to avenging their murdered friend.

When the end was reached, and Ransom Eldridge was in the act of leaving the graveside, the tall, elegant figure of the Silver Horn Sport stepped before him, bowing gravely, then speaking:

"Can I have a word with you now, Mr. Eldridge?"

"With pleasure, Mr. Freestone."

"Thanks. What I have to say will not detain you long," giving a quick, keen glance around as though to note how many eyes were turned their way. "About the Climax, then; of course poor Hunter held at least one share in the mine when he died?"

"He held one share, yes," with a slight bow, his face seeming to harden as he looked squarely into those blue eyes.

"And that share will be disposed of, as others have been under somewhat similar circumstances, sir?"

Ransom Eldridge drew back a bit at this politely yet bluntly worded question, and a tinge of deeper color came into his face as he coldly made reply:

"I can tell you nothing further, Mr. Freestone, until after our next regular meeting is held."

"When will that meeting take place, if I may ask?"

"At the call of the president."

As pretty much all Chloride City knew he who pronounced these words was that same official, this took the shape of a decided re-

buff; but the face of the Silver Horn proprietor showed no change, and in the same polite voice, though speaking considerably louder, like one who wishes all present to take in his full meaning, he added:

"Since those meetings are sacred to members of the company, Mr. Eldridge, of course I am barred out. But I'll make my offer now, which is just this: I will pay cash down for this share of Climax stock, and give ten per cent over and above the sum any other person is willing to pay."

"Do I make my meaning fully understood, Mr. Eldridge?"

"Perfectly, sir," with a slight bow. "I will make your offer known when the board next convenes."

"Thanks, awfully!" and for the first time since that interview began, Fred Freestone smiled, and, smiling, looked his every-day self.

Don Darling had been close at hand when that request for a few words was made, and he had both listened and watched through what followed with no slight interest.

Still, no remark was let fall from either side as he paired again with Mayor Eldridge in returning to town, nor was the matter touched upon at all until Eldridge paused in front of a one-story building near the center of the town, when he spoke:

"This is my office, Darling, and it is here the board meets whenever there is important business to be disposed of. You will join us?"

"Why should I?" rejoined the detective not a little surprised. "I naturally supposed such meetings were sacred to members."

"As a rule, so they are," with a faint smile, as he unlocked the door and pushed it open for their convenience. "This is an exceptional occasion, though, and—please step inside, Darling?"

No option being left him, the detective complied, and almost before he had time to take note of his present surroundings, a rap at the door called attention that way, and giving admittance to Jerome Felton, the mayor gave him an introduction in due form to Don Darling.

Although he had noticed this person while mixed up in the tragedy of the past evening, Darling had paid him little attention at the time, and it now seemed pretty much like inspecting a complete stranger.

Jerome Felton, whom Eldridge had named as his "side-pardner" or particular chum during the prospecting tour which ended with the discovery of the now famous Climax, was a man of probably five-and-thirty years of age, with a touch of frost marking his black hair.

In build he was broad and burly, evidently gifted with more than common physical powers, yet quick motioned and light upon his feet.

His complexion was dark almost to swarthinness, but clear and indicative of perfect health. His eyes were black as his hair, and he wore no beard of any cut, his strong face bearing a dim likeness to the portrait of the famous Corsican, Napoleon.

The next member to arrive was introduced as Creed Wallace, whose personal appearance well matched his surname: both were purely Scotch.

Don Darling felt a little disappointment when, as their hands met over that introduction, the new-comer addressed him in anything but the broad Doric he had expected; it seemed an intentional fraud to hear one of such marked characteristics speak without the faintest trace of accent, either highland or lowland.

Tall, gaunt, rawboned; sandy hair and freckled face; long, narrow head, with mighty nose and tremendous chin; that summed up Creed Wallace, so far as outward semblance went.

Shortly afterward the last of the surviving members came in together, two in number, and were introduced to the stranger from Denver as Andy Shelton and Neil Vance.

The first named was short, fat, blonde and bald; his blue eyes seemed full of laughter, and if their master was not habitually jolly, frank, full of life and good spirits, then his general appearance told lies.

Neil Vance was the youngest of the company, probably a year or two short of his third decade, to hazard a guess.

His hair, mustache and imperial all were black as the plumage of a recently moulted crow, and the manner in which they were kept hinted at something of a dandy.

His face was handsome beyond the ordinary, but to a critical observer it bore too evident marks of dissipation to be entirely pleasing.

It was with something more than the instinct which seems inseparable from his profession that Don Darling looked at these men, summing them up pretty much as has been here set down.

They were members of the League which had already lost nearly one-half of its membership, and since at least three of those one-time allies had perished by the hand of the secret assassin, it was no easy matter to refrain from wondering who was doomed to fall next?

With the arrival of Vance and Shelton the gathering was complete, and though one or two of that number cast half-uneasy looks toward the Denver Detective when Ransom Eldridge rose to his feet and cleared his throat, none of them saw fit to object to that outsider being present.

"Gentlemen, and fellow-members," began the president of the League, in grave, measured tones. "Once more we are called to assemble here, by the loss of a member in good standing at the time of his death. For the third time, and all within the limits of a single year!"

His voice grew husky as he made that announcement, and a slight, nervous stir took place among the members.

"I will call for a full and free expression on that point later on, gentlemen, as well as say a few words myself," added the president, his tones growing hard and metallic, but in that manner alone betraying the emotion which it was perfectly natural he should feel under the circumstances. "For the present, we will proceed in regular order."

"It is hardly necessary to remind you under what terms and conditions we hold our membership in the Silver League. You all know what the rules say in regard to selling or otherwise disposing of Climax stock."

"Yesterday, there were nine shares, represented by six shareholders. The number of shares remain the same, as they always must, but one shareholder has passed over, leaving as a part of our sworn duty—*this!*"

Then, abruptly changing his grave manner to one more business-like, the president put the question which all were expecting: who claimed the share of Climax stock left by Pike Hunter?

You know the terms, gentlemen: market price, with cash on the nail where there are legal heirs known to be in existence. There are such in this case, and the purchase money will be turned over to them without unnecessary delay."

The members looked at each other, shifting uneasily on their seats, seemingly in no great haste to add to the burdens they were already carrying. And so, to expedite matters, the president spoke to each in turn, taking them as they sat, beginning at his right hand.

This selection brought Jerome Felton last on the list, yet he was the first one to advance a positive claim for the pending share.

"I'll take it, with a thank-ye thrown in," came his deep, bluff tone. "It's worth all the money, and growing in value with each month."

"Little that amounts to, though, if a body has to leave it—as poor Pike Hunter left *his* share!" gloomily said Creed Wallace.

"When I leave mine, life will go at the same time," coldly declared Felton, "and after a man's dead, what matter the rest?"

Before more could be said, the president cut in, soberly saying:

"I must insist on my rights, Felton. Your claim holds good to one-half, but the other moiety stands in my name from this day on."

There was no objection raised to this, for all was working according to rule; and with that matter finally disposed of, Ransom Eldridge once more addressed the assembly.

"For the third time—omitting the as yet unexplained disappearance of David Ashmole—we are confronted by a dark and dev-

ilish deed of murder most foul!" he began, in tones rendered deeper than usual by powerful emotion.

"Who is it that deals such deadly blows against us? Why is it that only members of the Silver League seem marked for knife or for bullet?"

"Is it the work of some devilish schemers who hope thus to frighten us into selling out or abandoning the Climax? Or—is it the black and murderous work of a sworn avenger?"

"Touch lightly, Eldridge!" sharply cut in Jerome Felton, pointing his meaning further by a swift glance and nod toward the man from Denver. "We're not alone, remember, man!"

"Not alone, but all the better prepared to cope with our secret enemies for this company, Felton," responded the mayor, with a smile as he bowed toward the detective. "I have confided fully in Mr. Darling, and my reasons for so doing ought to be clear enough without actual explanations."

"I was merely acting on our old rule, sir," a bit stiffly retorted the burly member of the Silver League.

"You were right in so acting, and I owe an apology to the members for not posting them in advance. Yet 'tis not too late to make amends."

"At our last meeting I was authorized to negotiate with Denver authorities for a first-class detective. I did so, and Mr. Darling came in answer to my request."

"I have told him all about the trouble we have had, and given him all the light I could cast upon this ugly affair. Why wouldn't I, then? If he is to be of service to us in this case, he surely ought to know *all* that we can tell him?"

"If any member objects to my presence, I am perfectly willing to withdraw, sir," coldly declared the detective, rising to his feet.

"You will remain, Mr. Darling," almost sternly said the president. "We have nothing to conceal from you, and had I not been too badly flustered over this terrible affair, to properly attend to my duties as head of this board, never a whisper would have been lifted against your attendance here and now."

"I withdraw my objection, and express my regret that I said aught to raise a breeze," more cordially spoke up Jerome Felton.

"Then all is right, and I'll add this: I've told Darling of this woman avenger, and I repeat: *I believe she is killing off the League!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SILVER QUEEN'S WARNING.

It was the day after the funeral, when the mortal remains of Pike Hunter were "planted on the hillside."

Ethel Reeves was alone at her cabin home, standing at the front door, gazing half-dreamily out across one corner of the "truck patch" toward the rising ground which eventually became a grim and forbidding range of mountainous altitude.

It was one of those lovely days when it seems a sacrilege to remain cooped up within doors, and as she had no pressing household duties to occupy mind or hands, just then, it was not long before the really fairy-like little maiden decided upon taking a leisurely stroll with her own thoughts for company.

With one who lived after such a modest fashion, it did not take a very long time to make those preparations; a brief glance into the little mirror hanging against the wall, a donning of a slatted sunbonnet, then Ethel Reeves stepped across the threshold, shutting the door behind her, but taking no further precautions against lawless intrusion.

There were no tramps about Chloride City, and as for robbers—they would hardly think to grow wealthy over what they might find in that humble cabin of sticks and stones!

Although Ethel kept moving slowly in the same direction, it could hardly be that she had any particular destination in view, so far as her movements would indicate.

She seemed lost in thought, not all of which were on pleasant subjects, judging from her quivering lip and half frown at times; for now that the shelter of the mountain trees had been attained, Ethel had pushed back her bonnet, letting it rest upon her

shoulders, held simply from falling by the knotted strings beneath her chin.

Very lovely the little maiden looked just then, in spite of her troubled face, and so held he whose eyes had caught that light-hued dress from a goodly distance, ever since stalking her as cunningly as ever experienced sportsman stalked the wary buck.

Unwittingly, so busy was she with her thoughts, Ethel wandered from the smoother, more open ground, into a sort of defile, the rocky walls of which were low, yet forming an awkward barrier for a woman to cross in case the necessity should arise.

Seeing this, and knowing that the maiden could not escape him without turning back, the man who had followed her for some little distance, now quickened his steps, and used less care about deadening his footfalls.

As he came near, Ethel caught those sounds, and turning swiftly, she flushed warmly and uttered a low exclamation as she recognized the intruder.

"Mr. Vance!"

"What's the matter with Neil, Ethel?" quickly asked the member of the Silver League, drawing still nearer, both hands going out as though to clasp one or both of hers.

Instead of yielding her hand, Ethel drew both back with a nervous motion, at the same time murmuring:

"You frightened me, sir, coming up so suddenly when I—please let me pass, Mr. Vance!"

His rejected hands spread out as though to bar the way, and while there was a smile upon his darkly handsome face, there surely was none in his glowing eyes.

"Oh, come, Ethel! Don't be in such a mighty rush, just because I've happened to find you out here where it's so cozy for a little friendly chat! Or—is it just *because* of that? Is it *my* coming that sends you toward home in such a mighty rush, Miss Reeves?"

He could not withhold that flash of fierce temper, although he had resolved to act with more than customary prudence.

"I don't—no, but I must—I have work to do at home, sir," the maiden faltered, shrinking again as he moved closer to her.

Her face spoke far plainer than she could shape her tongue, however, and Neil Vance could not help seeing that with her fear was mingled an even less acceptable emotion: she loathed the touch he was offering!

Yet, seeing this so plainly that it set his naturally hot blood fairly on fire, the man would not take his portion, but still more doggedly resolved to dare all and learn the very worst that woman's lips could mete out to man.

Something in his face frightened Ethel still further, and she made as though she would pass him by, to return home; but in place of moving aside, Neil Vance barred her way still more utterly, at the same time speaking rapidly:

"Not just yet, Ethel. It's come to be a mighty hard matter for a fellow like me to get more than a passing squint at you, of late days; and now that a streak of luck has come my way, I reckon I'd be worse than a fool if I didn't freeze fast to it!"

"When father—if you would wait until—"

"It's *you* I want, and not your father, little lady," cut in the man with a short, hard laugh at the idea thus suggested. "And what is it I want of you most, Ethel? Guess—tell me—try to guess, won't you?"

No need to guess, after one glance into those glowing eyes, and the maiden shrunk away, bowing head and covering face with hands which trembled with positive fear.

She had long suspected that Neil Vance had fallen desperately in love with her, but up to this day he had never treated her save with respect, after his rough, somewhat uncouth fashion.

But now—oh, why had she ventured so far away from the home where she would be perfectly safe from such as this?

Even now the man did not press his advantage too far. He clasped both hands behind his back, the better to resist temptation, although he still barred the way with his body.

"Since you refuse to even *try* to guess, Ethel, I'll tell you."

"No, please don't! I'd rather not hear what—*don't*, Mr. Vance!"

"I hate to go flat against you, Ethel," with his tones growing harder and more dogged, "but I've got to do it this time. There's no telling when I'll have another chance, you're so confoundedly—but I'll not begin too mighty rough, little lady!"

There was a brief silence, which Vance evidently hoped might be broken by the maiden in a more agreeable fashion, but as she maintained her attitude, he began once more:

"It's old news I'm telling you, Ethel, for I haven't worn a mask on my face all the time, and I've come to loving you so terrible hard that you couldn't help seeing it, even if you were plum' blind!"

Ethel Reeves lifted her head and dropped her hands, now that the decisive words had been spoken. Her face showed marks of tears, but the moisture was swiftly drying away before her growing anger.

"I have seen it, Mr. Vance, and I've done all a poor girl *could* do to make you see how vain—"

"Don't you say it, Ethel!" half in anger, half imploringly. "I'm a rich man, or I will be when I sell my stock in the Climax. I'll sell out and take you away from here, to live as a lady, in silk and satin and lace and—why, dear girl! I'll just smother you all over with fine things—and my love, little lady!"

It was an odd mixture of vanity, menace, love and coaxing, but Ethel saw only the disagreeable features, and she made a gesture of repugnance which could not be misinterpreted.

"I care nothing for all that, sir, and I wouldn't marry you if you were made of gold and diamonds! Now—let me pass, I say!"

"For another lover, is it?" his fierce temper breaking bonds at last, and his grip closing upon her arms so viciously that pain drew a sharp cry from her lips. "Fred Freestone, perhaps? I've seen him skulking near the cabin, but—look you, Ethel Reeves," his white teeth showing viciously under the shadow of his jetty mustache.

"I'd murder you before I'd see you marry any one but Neil Vance! I tell you now, and I tell you mighty hard: I'll kill the man who dares to take what I've failed to win!"

Unconsciously to himself, as it is only charitable to believe, Neil Vance tightened his cruel grasp until another cry of pain broke from the lips of the maiden, and then—

"Break away, there, Neil Vance! Hands off, or go down a cripple for life!"

Sharp and distinct came that warning, and as the fellow turned his head to glance partly over one shoulder in the direction from whence those words came, he gave a shivering start and caught his breath sharply, for he saw—the Silver Queen!

She was masked, just as she was when occupying her chair at the Silver Horn faro-table, although a dark cloak was secured to her shapely person; but what interested Vance most, just then, was the fact that Madam Silver 'had him lined' simply to perfection.

"Release that young lady—*so!*" breaking off with a change of note as Ethel, twisting free from that relaxing grasp, brushed past her too persistent suitor, and hurried away in the direction of her cabin home.

All this happened so swiftly that the maiden was beyond his reach before Neil Vance could even in part rally from that utter surprise, and now, as though to cut off any attempt at pursuit on his part, Madam Silver moved down to cover Ethel's trail.

"Lucky for you, sir," coldly said the Silver Queen, lowering her revolver, but still keeping it handy for use. "Had you hesitated for even another second, I would have shattered your right elbow."

"By what right—"

"The right of one woman to defend another from insult or injury, you craven!" sharply cut in that deep, mellow voice as the Silver Queen moved slowly off in the direction taken by Ethel. "And if you molest that child further, I'll shoot you as though you were a mad-dog!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SILVER MASK LIFTED.

MADAM SILVER partly raised her weapon as the stern warning crossed her lips, and

hot though his rage was, Neil Vance flinched perceptibly from before that deadly muzzle.

"If you wasn't a woman!"

"If I weren't a woman, you wouldn't dare even to whine," came the coldly contemptuous retort. "As it is, you may go so far as to show your teeth, but that is the limit you dare not attempt to cross."

Since her first stepping to the trail left by the fleeing maiden, Madam Silver had kept in motion, steadily yet leisurely following the same line Ethel Reeves had taken, but never for an instant relaxing her guard, or giving an impeding which the rejected suitor might take advantage of.

Neil Vance was nearly suffocating with rage, for never had he met with a more shameful humiliation than this. And the worst of it all, now that Ethel had fairly escaped his importunities, was that he failed to see how he could turn the tables in his favor.

Without actually burning powder in public, the Silver Queen had won a reputation since coming to Chloride City for being "dead game," and one who would "shoot at the drop of a hat."

Although her face was covered by that silver-woven mask, without which no one in Chloride had ever seen her step abroad, Vance knew that Madam Silver was not talking merely for effect, but that she would wing or slay him without scruple were he to attempt anything like an assault.

Still, he could not refrain from spitting forth at least a portion of his venom, and while following that slowly receding shape, he said:

"If you're doing all this for Freestone—"

"I'm doing this to protect an innocent girl against a vicious cur, who ought never to be permitted within barking distance of one like Miss Reeves," came the cold retort.

Neil Vance turned almost ghastly pale with rage, and hoarsely cried as he made a fierce gesture with his tightly-clinched fist:

"I'll play even for all this, if it takes my life to get there!"

"Stop!" and her pistol flew up in line with his face. "You have come too far, and said too much, Neil Vance. Now—*last call!* If you dare to molest Ethel Reeves again, I swear that you shall die as you have so far lived—*like a cur!*"

The younger member of the Silver League flinched again. He could read death glowing in those dark eyes, and in spite of his fierce anger, he could not dare more: at bottom he was a coward, after all!

As though she saw all this, Madam Silver for the first time turned back upon the fellow, moving rapidly away in the same direction taken by the mountain maiden, betraying no fear of an assault or even a snap-shot from the discomfited lover.

Yet her caution was not entirely cast aside. Her right hand still grasped pistol-butt, and she cast frequent glances backward to take note of his doings.

Neil Vance made no move toward following the Silver Queen, and when a slight bend in the trail threw a vine-clad boulder between them, he was still where left, head bowed and white teeth gnawing at his red lip.

The instant her leisurely movements carried her out of his sight, Madam Silver sprang into swift motion, passing around that obstacle and winning a point from whence she could command that spot, herself unseen by the enemy.

For the space of more than a full minute the Silver Queen watched Neil Vance, with each moment expecting him to initiate some movement calculated to play even for his defeat; but when the fellow sunk down upon a low rock, covering face with hands, she abandoned that expectation, and silently stole away.

"Cowed for the time being, but—the girl ought to know—the old man should be put upon his guard! Will *she* tell him?"

Evidently Madam Silver had her doubts on this point, for after a barely perceptible hesitation, she quickened her steps and proceeded directly to the cabin home of Reuben Reeves.

The door was closed and the house appeared entirely deserted when the masked woman came in sight of the place, but as she

drew near the front, the door swung open and Ethel Reeves showed herself, unsteadily speaking her thanks.

"I couldn't stay to see—I was so frightened! But I thank you, oh, so much! I was afraid—he wouldn't let me go! I thank you—I can never tell you *how* gratefully, ma'am!"

Madam Silver made no answer, nor did she try to cut those plainly embarrassed thanks short. With dark eyes fixed upon that face with a strange intentness, the woman moved slowly nearer, until, Ethel giving way as before an irresistible force, she crossed that threshold and stood within the cabin home.

Ethel was beginning to grow frightened of more than Neil Vance and his unwelcome pleadings, but feeling that safety lay in talk, she repeated her thanks, until the masked woman cut her short by an imperious gesture with one silver-clad hand.

That member and its mate dropped lightly upon the maiden's shoulders, and for half a score moments the Silver Queen closely scanned that gradually paling face, like one who is trying to trace a certain likeness which, do all one might, persisted in evading that quest.

Little marvel, though, that actions like this should cause the girl uneasiness, if not actual fright.

This was the first time she had ever been so close to the Masked Mystery, but Ethel had heard much concerning the Silver Queen, and not all that was told had been in her favor.

As though baffled in her hope, whatever that might be, or else recognizing the terror she was giving birth to, Madam Silver dropped hands from Ethel's shoulders, and drew back a pace, though without shifting her painfully intent gaze.

Then, with a swift movement, Madam Silver lifted that cunningly woven mask from over her face, and turning so as to permit the clear light entering at the open door to fall athwart that visage, she spoke:

"Look, Ethel Reeves! Look close and carefully, I pray you! Now—have you ever gazed upon this face before?"

Awed, almost fascinated by that poorly disguised passion, the maiden obeyed, but when that question came, she shook her head in negation.

"I never saw you before, ma'am."

A swift change shot into that face, but was as quickly banished. And once more Madam Silver spoke to the girl:

"Again—take your time, little one! I can wait—I have grown accustomed to waiting—long and oh, so patiently! Now—*once more: try to remember—now!*"

But Ethel shook her head, shrinking back a little, for those dark eyes seemed strangely fire-lit for a face which seemed cold and composed as though cut out of marble, just then.

Again the Silver Queen seemed to recognize the error into which her eager desire had cast her, and forcing a smile to her pale face, she said, in deep, mellow, sweet tones:

"My face—look once more, Miss Reeves. Now—does it awaken no memory? Does it not remind you of some one, out of the past?"

"No! I don't—you frighten me!"

It was Madam Silver who recoiled, now, and the hand that replaced that cunning mask trembled perceptibly. She sprang across the room to the open front door, clutching its edge as she peered forth, her other hand partly drawing a revolver.

A half-score seconds thus, then Madam Silver turned toward Ethel, the weapon disappearing, and her voice sounding calm and even as ever when she uttered:

"I thought I heard a step, but I must have been mistaken. I could see nothing of that cur, and so—let Neil Vance rest for the time being, though!"

Had Ethel been less thoroughly disturbed by all that had happened her of late, she might have detected that suddenly devised ruse; but it mattered little, and Madam Silver had fairly well covered over her powerful emotion born of that failure.

Apparently her objections to talking only applied to that particular subject, for with slight delay Madam Silver began questioning Ethel concerning her daily life, now and then adroitly inserting something calculated

to bring forth her past, but all with scanty success.

Ethel was frightened, hardly less so than she had been when finding herself cornered by the man whose fierce love she had been evading for weeks past.

Knowing nothing concerning this strange being save what rumor had brought to her ears, the maiden could hardly be expected to feel at ease in such a presence, even after falling so deeply in her debt.

But those dark eyes held such a strange fire! Something vaguely terrifying seemed to lurk back of that pale, still beautiful, yet awe-inspiring visage from which the silver mask was lifted for her sake alone.

Thus it came to pass that the maiden unconsciously baffled the matron, and her eagerness to win growing stronger with each defeat, Madam Silver made her questions more and more pointed, growing so wholly absorbed in that pursuit as to entirely fail of noticing the sound of rapid footsteps on the beaten ground within the cabin.

Reuben Reeves caught the sound of that mellow voice before he was quite to the door, but though he paused for an instant to make sure his trained ears had not deceived him, he could not believe without further evidence.

Stepping silently forward, he stood upon his threshold, sternly gazing upon the little tableau thus presented.

Madam Silver had just put one of her pointed questions, and was waiting for an answer, when Ethel, whose face was toward the door, caught sight of her father, and uttered a low, glad cry.

Dropping the string of fresh trout which he had until then held in his hand, Reuben Reeves strode between the two women, so unevenly matched as to size, age and experience, one arm going around Ethel's waist, the other lifting with a passionate gesture as though to warn the Silver Queen back.

Her eyes betrayed her anger at this inopportune arrival, but she only pronounced his name.

"That's *me*, ma'am," said the old hunter, with forced calmness. "*This* is my shack, an' hyar—*this is my child!*"

"Have I worked harm to either one, Reuben Reeves?"

The old man cleared his throat, which seemed unusually clogged just then. He made a slow gesture, then slowly spoke:

"I'm an old trapper, ma'am. Mebbe you've hearn some hint that way?"

"I think I have heard something of the sort, yes. But why?"

"An' *bein'* a old trapper, ma'am, 'tain't to be wondered at ef a old critter was to stick to old ways. And so—shell I *say* it, ma'am?"

"Say what?"

"What a old trapper mought be expected fer to do ef sech a thing was to turn up an' 'pear likely fer to come to pass, ma'am. Which is sorter like *this*, ma'am," nodding his white-crowned head at each word:

"When a old trapper ketches the trail of a painter comin' *too* nigh his home-camp, he hain't gwine fer to stop to ax is it a he, or a she, afore he putts out its light, ma'am!"

The Silver Queen listened to the end, with that vivid light growing in her dark eyes.

One far less acute could hardly have missed the old hunter's meaning, and Madam Silver easily read his thinly veiled threat. If it stirred her at all, it surely did not add fright to her other strong emotions, for her voice was cold and even as she spoke in her turn:

"I am not supposed to be your shepherd, Reuben Reeves, but I drove *one* hungry wolf away from your sheepfold this day!"

"What's that?" with a start, and a quick tremor entering his voice. "You done *what*?"

"What you mean, ma'am?"

"That before you waste time and breath in threatening those who seek only your good and the good of your daughter," one hand waving toward the maiden, who still clung closely to that gaunt figure, "you had better guard your own treasures!"

"Ef you jest say what—*cain't* you, ma'am?"

Reuben Reeves spoke in far from steady tones, just then, and from anger he had turned to vague fear. Madam Silver doubtless saw this, for when she spoke again her tone was more friendly.

"I can at least warn you to beware of Neil Vance, Reeves. He is a cur, but even curs can work serious injury if let run too long and too far. Only this day—"

"Not *you*, gal?" cried the old hunter, bending low to flash a keen look into the face of his daughter. "Don't tell me that *he* done *you* any dirt while I was off, fishin'?"

"Nó, but—he frightened me!" faltered Ethel.

"The cussed whelp! I'll cut his fool heart out ef he so much as dar's to look twicet at you, birdy!" sternly vowed the veteran.

"Don't let the Silver League hear you say that, Reuben Reeves!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SHADOW OF COMING EVENTS.

MADAM SILVER pronounced the words, and something in her tones gave the old hunter quite a start. And, as he looked keenly into that masked face, he could see back of those silver threads a smile that seemed sardonic in the extreme.

Reuben Reeves was granted barely time for that one scrutinizing look, then the Silver Queen turned and passed out of the cabin, gliding swiftly away in the direction of Chloride City, never once looking back, never giving a sign to show that she caught the cry which he sent after that receding shape.

After that one vain call for more light, the old hunter stood in his doorway, watching the Silver Queen until she passed beyond his sight. And then, with an instinctive glance around in all directions to make sure nothing else had gone wrong, Reeves turned back to his daughter.

Ethel was expecting this, and now that the masked woman whose presence and actions had impressed her so curiously was gone, the girl felt both able and willing to confess all that happened her that day.

This Ethel did, holding nothing back, yet making her parent believe that a little less violence had been used by the angered lover, than her flesh would have born out, if exhibited.

Reuben Reeves listened with set jaws and frowning brows until the girl came to an ending; and even then he said less than Ethel had expected to hear.

"You'd ought to've told me how the durn fool was pushin' of ye ag'inst yer will, birdy, so ye hed, now! Ef I'd 'a' knowed what was gwine on afore, mebbe this moughtn't 'a' come to pass."

"I thought I could freeze him off, daddy," murmured Ethel, with a warm flush making her piquant face even more attractive than usual.

"Men o' *his* sort hain't so mighty easy friz, birdy. An'—I'll rip his heart out ef he dast to even bat a eye at you ag'in, Ethel!"

This was a blast of the actual fire which the old hunter was trying to keep hidden from his child, and annoyed at his own weakness, Reeves sprung to his feet, saying:

"Thar, thar, birdy! Don't you worry one weenty mite over what's done past an' gone by, now. As fer the time to come—waal, I don't reckon that young squirt'll be quick to git over bein' bluffed down by a woman, an' afore *that* cure is worked, mebbe I'll have a fa'r chauce fer to let him a little hint drap—so to speak!"

"You'll not get into a quarrel with Neil Vance, daddy?" imploringly asked Ethel, standing on tiptoe in order to reach arms around his neck.

"Course I won't git into no mux with the likes o' Neil Vance," loftily sniffed the old hunter. "*The* Lawd! Ef I hain't clean fergot all 'bout them trout!"

Gently removing those clinging hands, Reuben Reeves stooped to pick up the string of "speckled beauties" which he had dropped on recognizing the Silver Queen.

With these in hand, he passed through the room to the little "lean-to" or "summer kitchen," where hung the saddle of a yearling buck, recently killed.

"Reckon I'll tote 'em down to the mare, birdy," he said, thoughtfully, as Ethel followed him to that primitive storehouse. "*He* 'lowed he hed a tooth what was gittin' to sorter hone fer sech chawin' an' I done said I reckoned mebbe I mought fix it so's to

hev some to spare! Yes, reckon mebbe I'd better mog 'long down that way, birdy!"

The very pains he took to lessen her fears only served to alarm Ethel more, and now feeling certain her father meant to look up Neil Vance, for a purpose which she feared to even tell herself, she begged him to postpone the trip, if only for her sake.

Seeing that he might better act openly and above board, Reuben Reeves gave Ethel his pledge that he would not go out of his way to find Vance, and even should a meeting take place, that he would merely say a warning word against the fellow's coming about that place for the future.

"I jest 'lowed to leave sech a sober warnin' with Mare Eldridge, honey, but I reckon mebbe I'd best git off 'thout lettin' you know even *that* much, you're so turrible skeery!"

Now that all was made clear between them, Reeves bade Ethel keep the cabin closed until his return.

"An' ef that blame fool *should* come skulkin' 'round this ranch afore I git back, warn him off, plain an' solid, birdy!"

"If he refuses to go? If he should try to get in, daddy?"

"Thar's your gun, honey, an' I reckon you kin hit the bigness of a man, even ef it's shootin' at a cussed dog!"

After a few more words, the old hunter took his burden of fish and game, moving away in the direction of town, but casting frequent glances around on all sides, as though it would not greatly surprise him to see Neil Vance before he should reach Chloride City.

"Better not, an' so I'm wishin' I won't," muttered the old hunter, his gaunt jaws squaring as his still keen eyes flashed another look around. "Not fer *his* sake, though! Durn the ornery whelp! Dast to scrape a wing 'round *my* leetle pullet, hey?"

But Reuben Reeves saw nothing whatever of the youngest member of the Silver League while on his way to town, nor even after he had fairly entered that bustling place.

Without stopping to talk or gossip with those of his acquaintances whom he met—and that list comprised pretty much all of Chloride's citizens—the ex-trapper passed through town and drew near to the neatly-painted, well-kept residence of the mayor.

As previously stated, this building was located at the edge of town, to the north, and had a considerable space of unoccupied ground around and in front of it.

Owing to this fact, then, Reuben Reeves caught sight of Mayor Eldridge and another person, both seated on the shaded piazza in front of the house, some little time before he came within speaking distance.

"Thar's *him*, an' yender—the constable critter from down Denver-ways, I *do* reckon!" mentally exclaimed the hunter, drawing his shaggy brows closer over his eyes as a shade. "Fer a fact! Wonder ef they're talkin' it all over, an' gettin' a good ready fer to squelch that 'ar' critter who's kicked up sech a jo-hammered racket o' late?"

A grim smile came into that lined and weather-beaten countenance, but Reuben's long legs were swiftly carrying him nearer the house, and he could see that his approach had attracted attention, so his face was smoothed over for the occasion.

"Welcome, old friend!" cordially called out the mayor, while the hunter was still several rods distant. "I knew you were on the way, even before my eyes sighted you, my mouth began watering so! Trout—venison—look at them, man, dear!" with an appeal to the Dandy from Denver.

"Peared like you was honin' fer some sech chuck, boss, an' so I never stopped fer to find anythin' better," indifferently apologized Reuben Reeves, as he deposited the fish and game on the piazza floor.

"Who could ask for anything choicer, I'd like to know?" quickly exclaimed Eldridge, pinching the venison and turning over the trout, to finally hold up the largest one for Don Darling to admire.

If his purpose was to win a smile or a laugh from the old hunter, it was all labor lost. Cold and grim, the veteran waited until his patron finished his rhapsodies long enough to ask the price, which was immediately named.

"Cheap enough, too!" declared the mayor, at once producing the sum named. "Will

you contract to furnish a similar lot once a week, Reeves?"

"Ef I've got so much to spar', an' nothin' else don't happen fer to hender my comin', sir, reckon *your* money's wuth as much as any other," was the almost surly response; but Eldridge did not seem easy to take offense, this day.

"I'll be only too glad to get it, old friend, and as for the rest, why, man, dear, what is likely to happen to a hearty old buck like you?"

"Mebbe nothin', mebbe a mighty sight. But I've got jest *this* much to leave you, Ran. Eldridge: keep that thar Neil Vance from crowdin' in whar he hain't wanted, or you critters of the Silver League may hev to turn out fer 'nother berryin'-bee!"

A swift change came into the mayor's face at this gruff speech, and as though involuntarily he cast a quick glance toward the Denver detective before speaking:

"What has Neil Vance been doing to anger you, Reeves?"

"Too durn much, an' leavin' a plenty over, at that!" came the blunt reply. "He's bin pesterin' my little gal, an' gittin' wuss when she done up an' 'sole the fool' critter *he* wasn't *her* sort. An' so—keep him 'way from my shack, Eldridge, or by the Lord that made me! I'll kill him quick es I would a hungry painter I ketched creepin'!"

That dark, troubled look passed away from the face of Mayor Eldridge as he began to see the matter in its true light, and when he spoke again his tones were more conciliatory:

"You mean that Neil has been trying to court your daughter, isn't it, Mr. Reeves?"

"Which nuther she nur I don't *want* it, nur we won't *hev* it, nuther, ye want to onderstand, Mr. Eldridge!"

"Wait a bit, please, my dear sir," still more affably. "Of course it is a matter beyond my jursldiction, but I can't help thinking that you may be acting just a little too hastily, Reeves."

"Which?"

"I've known Neil Vance for a goodly number of years now, Reeves, and if any man living is entitled to say a kindly word for the youngster, that man stands in my shoes. And so—Will you listen, please?"

"'Twon't do no good to listen, fur's I kin see."

"Vance is a smart, healthy, bright young man, Reeves. He is more than well off, holding stock in the Climax, as you know. He can take care of a wife and family, and your daughter—"

"Is my fambly, Mr. Eldridge," curtly cut in the old hunter. "She's all I've got to keer fer, now, an' so—ef 'twas *her* wish to take Neil Vance, I'd knuckle down 'ithout a word; but 'tain't."

"She hates him like p'izen! She done told him so, pritty much, this day that's here now! An' *he* wouldn't play white, but ripped an' cuss an' swore he'd play even—an' sech durn foolishness! An' so—ef I was to look *him* up to say it, sir, durned ef I wouldn't wipe him clean off o' the face o' this airth!"

Passion choked the old hunter for the moment, but he quickly controlled that emotion, and swiftly added:

"Neil Vance skeered an' 'sulted my girl. She's got the marks o' his dirty dog's grip onto her arms this holy minnit! She didn't *say*, nur she didn't *show* 'em to me, but I saw it with my own two eyes!"

"An' *that's* pritty much what fetched me hyar now: to give him fa'r warnin', through you, Mr. Eldridge. An' hyar it is, in a hard lump!"

"Keep that cussed fool 'way from my gal, from me, from my shack, or I'll set my mark onto him so turrible deep that time nur eternity can't wipe that totem out!"

Without pausing for an answer, the old hunter turned about and moved swiftly off, leaving the mayor frowning darkly as he stared after.

Ransom Eldridge did not alter his attitude until Reuben Reeves had passed beyond his range of vision; but then, with a long-drawn sigh, he turned to meet the grave, inquiring look of the Dandy from Denver.

The mayor shook his head slowly as he resumed his seat, but it was fully a minute before his lips parted, to utter:

"I'm more than sorry this has happened,

just now! If Vance had only waited until—well, of course I'll have to put a stop to any further movements in that quarter."

"Will Mr. Vance acknowledge your authority, though?" quietly asked Don Darling, with the shadow of a smile coming into his handsome face.

"He will—he *must*!" sternly asserted the mayor, frowning darkly. "You heard what the old fellow said? Well—we can't afford to lose another partner so soon!"

"You surely don't think Reeves would kill Vance?"

Eldridge gave a swift, fierce gesture, his strong face seeming almost convulsed for the instant. And his voice was hoarse and husky as he spoke in turn:

"Think? I don't know *what* to think, man alive! Is it a killing crime for a young man to tell a girl he's in love with her?"

"Surely not, but when the girl declines to reciprocate?"

"I know. You think Vance ought to swallow the dose, and fall back to give place to some swain more highly favored. But—is this anything more than a slim excuse for downing another member of the Silver League?"

Don Darling gave a slight start, and almost repeated a former sentence:

"You don't think Reeves would murder him, Eldridge?"

"I'm almost *past* thinking, Darling!" with a fierce gesture. "I only *know* that the League is four men less, now, and—how have they gone? *You* explain that, Darling, and I'll pay you your own price! Four men less, and now—*is* Neil Vance to be the *fifth* victim?"

CHAPTER XIX.

MAKING A DUTY TOUR.

It was the evening of the second day following the warning given Ransom Eldridge by Reuben Reeves, for the benefit of Neil Vance.

Now, as then, Don Darling was seated cozily upon the roofed porch, a fragrant cigar between his teeth, but for the minute having only his own thoughts to keep him company.

These thoughts formed a rare mixture, in which self-satisfaction hardly filled the most prominent position.

The Denver Detective had cut precious little time to waste since his arrival in Chloride City, yet now as he leisurely ran all points in review, he certainly could not flatter himself on having achieved a very flattering degree of success.

Still, if he had not made any great progress, he felt fairly well assured that he had overcome some minor obstacles which might have given another man greater trouble, even if they had not proved sufficient to lead that man wholly astray.

The more closely Don Darling looked into this affair of the Silver League and its various tragedies, the more surely it loomed up as a deep and carefully laid plot.

He admitted that much to Ransom Eldridge only a short time before, but when the mayor began pressing him hardly as to just what discoveries he had made, and what shape his suspicions were now taking, the Dandy from Denver "cried off."

"It's *facts* you want, not fancies; *proofs*, not possibilities, my dear sir, and, just now, I have nothing of that description to offer you."

The president of the Silver League accepted this rebuff with good grace, at once letting the point drop, sensibly declaring that, as a matter of course, Mr. Darling knew his trade best; but then he proposed that they both "take an evening off," frankly declaring:

"I'm beginning to feel this steady strain too severely, Darling. I must 'let go all holds' for once, or— Well, I reckon you can understand what it is I mean, better than I can tell you?"

Darling did understand, and said as much.

Although he had a room engaged at The Grand, he had made little use of it, yielding to the solicitations of the mayor, and sleeping as well as taking his meals at the house. And being thus thrown so much into his society, the detective knew better than any other in Chloride City how constantly Ransom Eldridge was brooding over those mys-

terious murders, and how busily he was seeking some tangible clue to the silent slayer.

Something of all this was busying the brain of the Denver Detective this evening as he sat smoking, for his host had only recently passed into the house in order to prepare for the stroll through town.

A "duty tour" the mayor had lightly put it, with a quaint quip and airy jest as to the wide difference between the same office when held east or west.

"That means a glance at the elephant, of course," mused Darling, as he sat waiting; and before his mental vision uprose the tall, white-robed figure of the Silver Queen.

Passing time had only deepened the interest which he had from the very outset felt in Madam Silver, and while he was by no means fully convinced that in the presiding goddess of the Silver Horn was to be found that secret slayer, Don Darling *did* feel almost assured that the woman in mask would prove to be deeply interested in the solution of that death-riddle.

"I'd give a pretty penny to win an uninterrupted talk of half an hour with this Silver Queen, and—why not? I'll do it, or know— Ah, Eldridge!"

The return of the host cut that musing short, and as the mayor looked closer into the face of the detective, all traces of those absorbing thoughts had faded away.

"It's a bit early, yet," said the mayor, sitting sideways on the piazza railing, his foot swinging free as the arm on that side passed around the slender post against which his head was now leaning. "And—I say, Darling!"

"You have my gracious permission, sir," gravely answered the Dandy from Denver.

"Thanks, awfully!" with a low, amused chuckle. "You're a mighty sight better fellow than I expected to see, when my request for a detective was filed, Darling."

"Shall I salaam, sahib?"

"And that makes me feel so much more at ease when, as now, I simply *have* to take an hour off duty!" declared the mayor, with a gradual dropping of the mask which, as in duty bound, he customarily wore in public:

"I've led a free, active, blunt life, you understand? As a rule, I've worn my colors where any man could spell them out for the bare trouble. And so—well, when a man who's had a training of *that* sort, finds himself dumped into a nasty hole where he can't— Darling, if I couldn't break away from masks and plots and devil's secrets once in a while I'd either go mad or kill—myself, or a better fellow!"

"You're thinking too steadily over this mystery, Eldridge."

"Too much!" echoed the mayor, coming down upon his feet and smiting the air with his tightly clinched fist. "How *can* it be too much, while those poor lads are still un-avenged? While the infernal assassin still runs halter-free! While—oh, if I could only—only—"

Ransom Eldridge broke off, turning away the length of that porch.

Don Darling made no move to follow him, nor did he say aught. Right or wrong, he believed it was wisest to let the man rally unaided.

That came about quickly. Hardly a minute passed by before Ransom Eldridge retraced his steps, a faint smile upon his face and his tones calm and even as he spoke again:

"We're early birds, out here, Darling, when you speak of the best end of the night. And so—reckon we might as well get a move on?"

"That's for you to say," but rising from his seat and putting on the hat which had been lying in his lap the while.

"We'll make a start, then," declared Eldridge, leaving the piazza and moving toward the town proper as soon as Darling gained his side. "Seems a bit odd to you, maybe, but don't forget that west isn't east, nor a mining-camp a metropolis!"

"I've noted a point or two difference, for a fact," drily.

"Just so! And there are mayors, *and* mayors, my friend! Take it out here, and a mayor is a species of public property; and if he acts any differently from the ordinary sport, he is at once set down as putting on frills, and so his usefulness is lost, to say the very least."

In a half-earnest, half-sarcastic way, Ransom Eldridge rattled on in this manner while the two men were moving toward the main portion of the town, and as the illuminated sign of the Silver Horn was sighted, he frankly owned up to a genuine touch of the gambling fever, and added:

"You can look on and take notes if nothing else, Darling. As for me, I feel that nothing less than the ripple of cards and clink of coin and chips can cool my fever. And that's no lie, either, although you are trying to make believe it's all a crazy jest!"

With a pause at the bar barely long enough to order drinks and empty the glasses, Mayor Eldridge passed on into the card-room, where they found pretty much the habitual crowd gathered, even though their first glance showed them the Silver Queen was absent.

Fred Freestone filled the dealer's seat at the table which Madam Silver took charge of when dealing, and finding a seat at this table, Ransom Eldridge at once plunged into play, betting heavily and with seeming recklessness.

He took his place when a deal was drawing near its end, and instead of watching the "run of the cards" while waiting for a fresh shuffle and start, the mayor barely took a comprehensive glance at the case, then dropped his bets to suit the cards yet undrawn.

Apparently Fred Freestone did not recognize this new-comer, for he gave no sign to that effect, even when glancing across the table when the deck was shuffled and slipped into the box for a new deal.

Now, as he had begun, Eldridge bet with apparent rashness, using gold and notes in place of the regulation chips; but as Don Darling grew interested in watching this new phase in the character of his employer, he saw that underneath lay a method, and then he knew, what he had begun to suspect, that at heart Ransom Eldridge was a confirmed gambler.

Dame Fortune showed no particular favor to either side, but when the box was empty again, if anything the mayor was a little ahead of the game. And then, in obedience to a quiet signal made while waiting for those who saw fit to attempt "catching the turn," a slender, pale-faced gambler slipped into the chair which the proprietor of the Silver Horn vacated at the end of the deal.

Ransom Eldridge frowned a bit at this change, and said nothing, and continued his play just the same. If anything, fate ran still more evenly, and there could not have been more than a few dollars difference one way or the other, when Eldridge finally pushed back his chair, with a muttered ejaculation of disgust.

"It's like taking from one pocket to cram into the other!" he declared, apologetically, to the assembly quite as much as to his immediate companion, the Dandy from Denver. "I've laid down enough to buy a respectable mine, and taken up about the same pile. And that makes mighty poor sport for a fellow when he feels just like making or breaking!"

Don Darling raised no objections to moving on, since neither Madam Silver nor Fred Freestone were visible about the Silver Horn; and after another brief pause at the bar, where Mayor Eldridge left a golden coin "for the good of the house," the two men passed into the outer air.

"Whither now?" asked the detective, but without any great interest as to the answer which might be given.

"Go the rounds, of course," the answer came instantly. "Tis a sort of duty tour with me, as I told you before, and while the Silver Horn is the main resort, there are plenty of others which an impartial official can't well afford to wholly ignore. So—*en avant!*"

Making brief stops at each place, and always bearing "the good of the house" in mind, Mayor Eldridge led his companion to half a dozen resorts of similar nature to the Silver Horn, though on a lesser scale; but in none of them did he take seat at the tables, though dropping a few dollars at each, as a rule.

This sort of "duty" began to grow wearisome to Don Darling, at last, and he bluntly

declared as much when leaving the last of those places behind them.

"Surely it's not essential that I play tag to your honor, is it?" he added, half in jest, but with a touch of earnestness below all. "So long as I saw a chance of studying human nature through a silver halo, I didn't mind the trouble, but now—shall we look in at the Horn again?"

Without reply, Eldridge led the way back, but when they passed those heavy curtains and glanced down the room, neither Madam Silver nor her handsome ally, Fred Freestone, was to be seen.

The mayor looked at the detective inquiringly. Darling shrugged shoulders and shook head, then turned away without giving any audible answer. And when once more out in the night, Eldridge turned in the direction of his home, seeming content to call his duty tour at an end.

The two men had nearly reached the precise point where they had stood when that silent shot struck the mayor, that other night. And now, as then, a startling interruption came to their talk.

A wild, shrill yell as of death-agony rung forth on the night air!

CHAPTER XX.

THE SHADOW MATERIALIZES.

"HARK!" cried Mayor Eldridge, grasping Darling's arm with unconscious tenacity. "What's that?"

That wild scream seemed echoing throughout the town, yet everything felt awfully still, oddly though the statement sounds.

"Is it—On guard, Darling!" swiftly hissed his companion, whipping forth a revolver as he crouched with a searching glance around the spot. "If it's a trap to—"

Another voice rung forth as that word came, but while it was hardly less earnest than that awful appeal, there was a vast difference between the two sounds.

"Help! This way, all of ye!" that second alarm pronounced, more clearly localizing the scene of trouble. "This way, for—"

There followed a string of shots, some one evidently working a revolver as swiftly as a practiced finger could manipulate the double-action.

This was a method of spreading an alarm which was far more familiar to such towns as Chloride City, and as by magic dozens of shouts arose from as many different points, all in answer to that appeal.

"Trouble, but no trap—for us!" instantly decided Mayor Eldridge as the alarm assumed this shape. "Come—get there, Darling!"

Breaking into a run, in common with many others, all of whom had in view the same destination, our two friends hurried at speed toward the scene of trouble, with something akin to the same fancy stirring each brain: was this another stroke aimed at the Silver League?

"That's Felton, or I'm losing my wits!" came in hoarse accents from the mayor, as another deep-toned shout for help came through the night, from a point hardly clear of the town. "Another murder! If it is—On deck, old pard!"

With that shout in answer, Eldridge rushed on at a pace which taxed the younger detective acutely to maintain; and then, among the foremost, they gained the scene of yet another tragedy.

"Who is it, Felton?" demanded the mayor, as he caught sight of a prostrate shape lying there in the shadow of the night.

"Neil—Neil Vance, poor boy!" came the husky reply.

The speaker was kneeling on the ground, that head resting against his leg, one hand adding its support, while the other still gripped the revolver from whose blackened muzzle the alarm had been spread all over town so swiftly.

Asking no more, but giving a husky sound that was half groan, half curse, the mayor dropped to his knees on the other side of the body, making an examination for himself, paying no heed to the excited cries and eager questions which poured forth from that rapidly gathering crowd.

"Cut—stabbed to the heart!" suddenly cried Eldridge as his fingers found that bleeding wound. "Who did it? Who—you—"

were first to sound the alarm, Felton: *who killed the poor lad?*"

While the mayor was uttering these words, Jerome Felton gently lowered the lifeless form to the ground, striking his blood-stained hands against each other as he rose to his feet. Eldridge imitated this movement, and it was not until they stood face to face that his fierce questions were answered by the Silver League member.

"I was going home—right across yon' short cut," with a gesture to indicate the course taken. "I heard the cry, and as I turned this way, I caught just a glimpse of a swiftly moving shape."

"Who was it? Where was it? Which way did it go?" swiftly demanded Eldridge of his fellow-member.

"Don't know—how *was* I to know?" with a touch of irritation as Don Darling fancied. "I didn't even know what was the matter, *then!* But it was right on my way, and so I jumped ahead—to find poor Vance!"

"Dead—murdered—poor boy!"

"Murdered, yes; dead—not quite—*then!*"

These words came in jerks, one might almost call that manner of utterance, but Eldridge gave a sharp cry as his quick wits caught at—it surely *was* a hint at—what?

"Not quite dead? He was still alive when—*what did he tell you*, Jerome Felton?"

Almost fiercely came this question, and the strong fingers of the Silver League president seemed about to meet in that firm flesh as they closed upon Felton's arm.

"He said that—The doctor!"

Felton cut himself short as he recognized a large, familiar figure forcing a way through the now dense crowd, and before he could say more, or before Eldridge could repeat that question, Don Darling came to the front with a warning whisper:

"Slow and sure, Eldridge! Time enough to share with the whole town after *we've* heard the word—understand?"

At a word from the lips of Mayor Eldridge, way was made for Dr. Brewster, who promptly fell to work making a professional examination of that bloodstained figure.

"Now whisper what you started to say, Mr. Felton," guardedly spoke the Denver Detective as the general attention seemed turned toward doctor and corpse.

But instead of complying at once, Felton shook that light hand from his arm, then drew Eldridge a little ways apart from the other, letting fall a few hurried words into the bending ear.

Reading this action aright, the detective gave his shapely shoulders a slight shrug, then averted his gaze, watching the physician at work.

Dr. Brewster had been given a sufficiency of practice along these lines since casting his professional lot among the mining regions, and uncertain though the light was, he found little difficulty in reaching a definite conclusion concerning this case.

"The man is dead," he declared, turning his head, without rising to his feet, however. "He has been stabbed, and from a superficial examination, I think I am safe in saying the knife or dirk touched his heart."

There was a brief and almost painful silence following this grave announcement, broken by the clear yet agitated tones of Andy Shelton, another member of the Silver League:

"This makes the fourth man we've found murdered! This is the fifth member of the Silver League to pass off the roll! Now—*who is marked to go next?*"

Another brief silence, then an ugly muttering which gradually rose and swelled until it became a savage roar for vengeance!

"Upon whom, men of Chloride?" suddenly called forth the mayor, his right arm going up as though to compel a hearing.

"The one who done the bloody job, be course!" cried a voice from out of that crowd.

"Shall we wait in idleness and fear, until yet another of our rapidly lessening number is marked for bullet or steel?" fiercely demanded Andy Shelton, now more thoroughly aroused than any citizen of Chloride could remember seeing him before. "I for one say *no!* Vengeance, men of Chloride! Down with the devilish assassins who are covering your fair city with shame and black disgrace!"

Again the ominous roar broke forth, and

yet again did the mayor display what marvelous influence he had gained over those turbulent spirits.

"Wait, friends and fellow-citizens! Wait until we have light to guide us aright. Then—I'll be one to hark ye on, rather than hold ye back from dealing out just retribution to the foul assassins!"

"Wait—wait—is it forever?" passionately cried Shelton, for the first time within the memory of men openly opposing his president, as one of the Silver League. "If so, we'd all better name our representatives, for these infernal butchers will not leave one of the League alive to act as such!"

Ransom Eldridge stepped forward, a hand touching the fat man's arm before he spoke a few words in a whisper which none save Shelton himself could catch.

Whatever that communication may have been, it produced an immediate effect, for Shelton subsided without another remonstrance.

Then Mayor Eldridge, possibly to give the excited crowd food for thought, safer than that which had been flung them by the angered member of the League, called aloud:

"Pass that lantern across, you who hold it! Doctor," turning to Brewster as he added, "please make a closer examination, will you? Is it not possible that some clue may be found by means of which— With me, Mr. Darling," he broke off, at the same time taking possession of the lantern which was passed over as called for.

Willingly enough the Denver Detective bore the mayor company, both moving close to that motionless body from which the vital spark had so recently fled.

Although he could not even guess what Felton had whispered to the mayor, and which had almost surely been passed from the latter to Andy Shelton, Darling felt that something sensational was pending, and that when it broke loose, Ransom Eldridge would be in the midst of it.

For this reason, then, rather than morbid curiosity or any hope of finding the hinted at clue upon the body, Don Darling complied with that curt request, and took keen note of all that followed.

Eldridge cast the light squarely upon the bloody breast of the corpse, and hold it thus with untrembling hands while the doctor opened the damp garments, using a knife for the purpose of more easily baring that punctured bosom.

While he was doing this, a small, flat note-book slipped from an inside pocket, and stooping quickly, Don Darling took possession of it, meeting the keen gaze of the mayor as he straightened up again.

Without uttering a word, the Denver Detective opened the book, holding the inside cover so that the light fell upon a small printed label.

That label contained his name and Denver address. And that note-book was the same which he had lost the night an unseen power struck him senseless as he was quitting his spying upon those nocturnal shadows!

Ransom Eldridge gave a slight nod of understanding, and the detective slipped the recovered property into his breast pocket.

Paying no attention to this bit of what he doubtless considered unimportant by-play, Dr. Brewster completed his examination, and then repeated his former statement: Neil Vance was dead; had come by his death through the stroke or thrust of a knife or dirk, which had almost beyond the possibility of a doubt, touched if indeed it had not cleft his heart in twain.

While this report was being delivered, Eldridge passed the lantern to Darling, and as the doctor finished, he spoke out with stern emphasis:

"You all hear this, men of Chloride? For the fourth time a friend and business partner has gone down in death before the weapon of a devilish demon of murder! The end must come sooner or later, and why wait longer? Why permit a slender doubt to stay our hands? Why let friendship hamper justice?"

"Why, for a fact?" cried out Andy Shelton. "If you know, or even suspect the guilty demon, out with it, Ransom Eldridge!"

A score or more lusty voices took up that fierce demand, and as though losing his last scruples by catching at least a portion of that savage fire, the mayor strode swiftly

forward and letting a hand fall heavily upon a shoulder, cried in stern accents:

"Surrender, Reuben Reeves!"

With a low, startled cry the old hunter flinched and attempted to break away, but those white hands closed upon him and held him fast.

CHAPTER XXI.

ACCUSED BY THE DEAD.

"I NEVER—let up, ye crazy critter!" cried the old hunter, beginning to realize what that sudden action might portend.

Instead, Mayor Eldridge only held him tighter, and lifted his voice in a sharp, clear summons:

"Darling! The League! Close in and guard—to me, all of ye!"

Although he had been in a measure prepared for some decided move, thanks to the notes he had taken, Don Darling was taken nearly as much by surprise as was the main assembly; still, knowing from past experience how easy a matter it is to fire the blood of a crowd like this, he was already making his way toward the mayor and his captive when that summons rung forth.

Felton, Shelton, Wallace, the other members of the Silver League, also gave prompt obedience to the call of their chief, and before the startled crowd could fairly comprehend the state of affairs, the nucleus of a responsible guard had formed around those two men.

"Stand back—give elbow-room, men of Chloride!" cried the mayor, in tones which reached all present, despite that growing growl which lacked but a single word to burst forth in the always terrible cry for human blood.

"No honest man will ever attempt to defeat justice by calling for mob-rule!" declared the Denver Detective, now close beside the prisoner, with a revolver clasped in his right hand, and a face the stern expression on which plainly foretold fight in case of any mad rush.

"I never done ary thing fer to—"

"Prove your freedom from guilt by submitting to a fair investigation, then," swiftly cut in Don Darling. "Unless you are guilty—"

"Whoever dast say I be, lies like a cussed cur!" hotly cried the veteran, giving a fierce jerk and twist in hopes of freeing himself from those strong white hands.

In vain. Ransom Eldridge kept his hold like grim death, and was able to back up that plea besides.

"Stand aloof, men of Chloride! And you, Reuben Reeves, submit to a fair investigation. Unless the proof is positive against you, I'll guard your life with my own!"

"Be sensible, man!" added Don Darling, in lower tones, but distinct enough for the old hunter to catch without difficulty. "If it comes to a row now—you'll be the first one to die!"

His meaning was pointed by a sudden outburst from the crowd, which seemed just getting at the truth of the matter, helped by a fierce cry which went up from some unknown party.

"He done it! Old Reeves cut the lad! Down him—to the rope with the bloody old butcher!"

A momentary recoil of the units composing the crowd, a low, strange sound as though all were catching breath in unison, then—before the storm could fairly burst, Don Darling swiftly spoke to the mayor:

"It's coming! Talk to 'em—talk, or we're gone up!"

His last words were drowned by the deep, hoarse, far-reaching roar such as only a mob of lynchers can give; but Eldridge had caught his full meaning, and the other members of the Silver League were ready for the supreme test.

Four hands closed upon the accused, other four hands gripped revolvers as the guards faced that now howling mob with stern resolution to hold or to die, imprinted upon every face.

And Ransom Eldridge?

His hands were free from weapons as he stepped a little in front of his fellow-members and their ally, the detective, facing the crowd where it swayed the most thickly. His white hands flew up with a double gesture of appeal, and his deep, clear tones forced a hearing.

"Peace! Hold your hands, all ye men of Chloride who are clean white and honest bred! The one who fires a shot or strikes a blow now, before the whole truth is ascertained, I brand as an assassin as foul at heart as was the assassin who murdered poor Neil Vance!"

"Didn't you say—hain't you ketched him red-handed?"

"Didn't Reeves turn the trick?"

"We'll jest finish the job fer you, mare!"

Sample cries taken from the roaring storm which poured upon the Silver League president, but instead of finching or being borne down, Ransom Eldridge seemed strengthened for the critical test.

"It's naked justice we demand, friends!" he cried, his voice ringing out clear and penetrating as the blast of a bugle. "We are as ready to use tongues and hands against murder, just as we ever have beer. And for that reason I beg you to withhold your hands until the plain truth can be ascertained."

"Didn't Reeves kill Neil Vance?"

"He's a dirty dog liar who dast to say I done it, then!" came an indignant denial from the lips of the old hunter.

"Quiet, or you'll have the gang trampling the lot of us to bloody pulp!" sternly muttered Don Darling in the veteran's ear.

"You hear his denial, friends?" cried the mayor, deftly turning that outburst to his own account. "As free men and honest citizens yourselves, you surely can't deny Reeves the right to a fair and impartial hearing?"

"Didn't he do it, then?" persisted that vicious voice from the mass. "If not, what made ye bounce the critter so mighty hard fer?"

"To give him a fair trial, such as every honest man within reach of my voice will bravely back me up in demanding," quickly answered the other. "I make my appeal, gentlemen, not as the mayor of this fair city, but as one man talking to his equals: hold back until the guilt or innocence of Reuben Reeves is fully established."

"Whar's the court fer to try him at?"

"We will form one ourselves," was the instant reply. "I pledge my word of honor that no unfair advantage shall be taken of those who may differ from me as to this matter. And now—show your hands, men of Chloride!" his voice growing in power as he capped the climax.

"Show your hands, all honest citizens! Those in favor of law and order over mob rule, right hands up—fingers empty!"

Mayor Eldridge already knew that his victory was won, but his face betrayed his strong triumph as fully four-fifths of the right hands rose in the air in answer to that clarion call.

"Good! Now—those who prefer bloodshed to law—"

"Thar isn't nary one left, your Honor!" cried the same voice which had tried the hardest to stir up mischief from the start. "All we want is to hev plain jestic measured out. Ef Reeves killed Vance—"

"He shall pay the extreme penalty of the law, even if I have to act the sheriff's part and adjust the noose myself!" sternly cried the mayor, giving a final wave of his hand, then moving back to his allies.

"Make for my office with him, if it comes to a hustle!" he said, in tones barely audible to the surviving members of the Silver League. "If I can, I'll keep the mob headed off, but—"

Fearing to give the crowd too much time in which to rally from the effect of his passionate appeal, Mayor Eldridge once more addressed them in clear tones, stating that, for reasons which would readily occur to every sensible citizen, he did not deem it either wise or advisable to conduct that investigation further out there in the open air.

"Of course there's no room in town big enough to hold you all at one time, so—here's my offer, gentlemen! Pick a certain number of representative men from among yourselves, to act on your behalf. I'll add to them my partners, and the detective from Denver."

"This will make enough to try the case on its merits, and when the story is fully told, every point shall be made perfectly clear to you, one and all, before any positive verdict is rendered."

"Is this plain enough? As honest, law-abiding citizens, can any one of you ask for anything fairer?"

"Whooray for the mare!" cried one easily enthused digger, flinging his battered felt high in air. "He's clean white, an' purtier'n a yaller spotted dog under a red speckled wagon!"

In certain respects mobs of this caliber are very like a flock of sheep; a leader can take them pretty much anywhere, right or wrong. And so it proved on this occasion, for the crazy outburst of a half-drunken mine laborer carried away the majority, and the victory was won along the lines Ransom Eldridge had marked out for himself.

"I thank you, gentlemen, in the name of law and order," he cried, at once availing himself of the advantage. "Nominate your representatives, please, and let them come down to my office. We will escort Reuben Reeves directly there, and be ready for the session as soon as your election is made known."

This was running a certain degree of risk, as no man knew better than the mayor of Chloride City, but he was determined to have a fair and impartial trial, and so took the long chances.

If he had asked, instead of taking it for granted, that favor might not have come his way so easily; but this only went to prove Eldridge a man among men, when it came to carrying an essential point.

By this time, too, the old hunter had cooled down in a measure, and seeing how little it would take to throw him helpless into the merciless clutch of the mob, he made no resistance when his guards hurried him off through the night, heading for the office in which the Silver League held their regular or called meetings.

This place was reached without aught happening to block or to hinder, and turning the key, Ransom Eldridge flung wide the door, himself fetching up the rear.

A light was quickly struck, and then, feeling that it was fully time for him to make a remonstrance of some description, the old hunter once more declared his complete innocence of that killing.

"It jest happened so, that I was down town, an' jest happened so that I loped 'cross to whar the racket cut loose. But—so help me the good Lawd up yander! I never tetched the critter to hurt!"

"Then Neil Vance died with a lie on his lips!"

"What?" ejaculated Reeves, turning ghastly pale as he turned upon the stern speaker. "He didn't say—how could he, man?"

"Neil Vance charged you with murdering him, all the same," coldly asserted Jerome Felton, seemingly unmoved by that tremulous appeal.

The old hunter shrunk back, shivering from top to toe, apparently half-stunned by the accusation which came from the dead!

Ransom Eldridge lifted a hand in warning as his keen ears caught sounds of the crowd drawing that way.

"Say no more, any of you," he hurriedly uttered, at the same time. "Wait until the others are here to hear and to see that all is fair and above-board."

He stepped to the door, holding it partly open, so that the light of the lamp shone past his portly person while he waited for the arrival of the representative citizens, whom he saw marching at the head of the dense crowd.

Greeting the mayor, the elected paused in front of the office while their chosen leader, a prominent merchant named Wilkinson, made a brief address to the crowd, bidding them wait patiently for their report, which would be delivered at the earliest possible moment, bearing in view the good of law and justice.

This brief speech was quite well received, and then the ten chosen citizens were ushered into the office by its owner, the door was closed, and after a slight pause, Ransom Eldridge called the meeting to order.

"Reuben Reeves! You are charged with killing Neil Vance!"

CHAPTER XXII.

DEFENDING HIMSELF.

"I NEVER tetched so much as a hair o' his head, sir!" sharply cried the old hunter,

whom that brief delay had nerved after an almost marvelous fashion.

"You enter a plea of not guilty, then?" "Course I hain't guilty, an' nobody but a plum' fool would reckon I was, eyther!" declared Reeves, with rising indignation.

"Will you be so kind as to coach the prisoner, Mr. Darling?" coldly asked the president. "Show him what *not* to say, please."

"The prisoner pleads not guilty, your Honor," gravely said the Denver Detective, promptly taking the position indicated by Eldridge.

Now, as though realizing that he was taking the conducting of the case entirely upon himself, Eldridge gravely apologized to the representatives of the citizens, and asked their pleasure.

There was a brief consultation in whispers, then Mr. Wilkinson said:

"We are perfectly content with your lead, Mr. Eldridge. All we want is to get at the bottom facts, and there is no need for electing a regular court: we can all act as judge and jury, both in one."

The mayor declared that his action had been taken with that view, and saying no more on the point, he nodded toward Jerome Felton, who at once stepped into the clear space which seemed left for that purpose.

"You were first to discover the body of Neil Vance, I believe?"

"After the murderer left it, yes, your Honor."

"Tell us all about it, Mr. Felton. You were near the place, of course, since you were so early on the spot; but how happened it?"

Jerome Felton repeated the brief explanation he had given while on the spot where that life went out, then added:

"It was almost in my road, as you all know. Somehow it struck me that I recognized the voice, although it was changed so awfully! And as the notion hit me, I hurried on, pulling my gun, of course."

"I caught just a glimpse of a shadowy shape moving off toward the rising ground, but before I could have caught the drop, 'twas gone, completely!"

"Did you recognize that person, Mr. Felton?" asked Wilkinson.

"No, sir. For one thing, I didn't have time. 'Twas just a glimpse, and more like a moving shadow than anything flesh and blood. And then—well, I caught a choking cry, and that made me forget all else, just then!"

"A cry? From the—from Neil Vance?" asked Eldridge.

Jerome Felton bowed assent, a brief spasm passing over his dark, strong face. But then, quickly rallying, he said:

"I know him at sight, sirs, and forgetting all else for the moment, I lifted his head from the ground, and begged him to speak, if only a word to tell me he was not badly hurt."

"Did he speak, though?" eagerly asked Wilkinson.

"Just two words, sir," slowly answered the witness.

"And those words? What were they, Felton?"

Instead of replying at once, the witness shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other, moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue, then cast a fleeting glance toward the accused, whose form was now drawn rigidly erect, and in whose eyes shone a light of stern defiance.

Averting his gaze with a little shiver, the witness spoke in tones which sounded husky and a bit unsteady:

"Must I tell it, gentlemen? I was hot, then, but now—I'm beginning to think poor Vance couldn't *really* have meant it the way I took his words, first-off. And so—"

"You've said it oncet, an' I reckon 'twon't split the thrapple of ye to say it ag'in," cut in the old hunter with grim emphasis. "Spit it out in a p'izen lump, critter! You've done me all the dirt you kin, a'ready."

In spite of the rude idiom, and the touch of fierce scorn which tinged these final words, there was something of native dignity about the veteran which counted a point in his favor with Don Darling, as well as more than one of those now sitting in judgment upon Reuben Reeves.

Ransom Eldridge appeared one of those

touched, but only for an instant, then he gravely spoke to the hesitating witness:

"Go on, Mr. Felton. What two words did Neil Vance pronounce?"

"They came when I asked him how it all happened," came the slow, reluctant answer.

"And poor Neil gasped out, '*Reeves—killed!*'"

Notwithstanding something of this nature was to be expected from what had gone before, a sensation followed this utterance.

Low cries and ejaculations broke from the men sitting in judgment, and from outward appearance alone, hardly one among their number but what felt more serious concern than did the old hunter, on whom the dying member of the Silver League had fastened a brand of blood!

Having given his damning testimony, Jerome Felton drew back to the rear, and this left Reuben Reeves fully exposed to those eyes. But he had lost all signs of fear or confusion, now, and standing straighter than he had been seen for years gone by, his head proudly erect, he spoke in slow, measured accents:

"From the way ye level eyes this yer way, gents, I reckon you're meanin' fer to say that it's pritty nigh time for the old man to git a hustle onto his tongue, ef he don't want snap-judgment to be tuck in his case. Ef I'm right—*be I, Ran. Eldridge?*"

"What can you say in self-defense, prisoner?" gravely asked the presiding officer.

"Fu'st, it's *you* I reckon I'd better begin with," said Reeves, turning far enough to win a fair view of his accuser. "I never *did* take no great stock in you, Jerome Felton, but I raally didn't reckon you'd take the trouble to go plum' out o' your way to do me dirt, *like this!*"

Felton made a deprecatory gesture, then said, huskily:

"It's the toughest job I ever tackled, Reeves! But—what would you have? I'm as good as under oath to tell the whole truth!"

"An' it's the plum' truth you've bin spittin' out, all this while?" questioned the accused, his lank jaws working nervously over an old quid of tobacco the while.

"It's gospel truth, Reeves, though I wish I could own up to a lie!"

"Jest so. It cuts you clean to the heart. A blind critter could see *all that*, an' never take his head out of a poke, nuther! Jest so! An' you didn't hear crooked, of course? You didn't make no mistake as to them couple o' words the critter let drap?"

"No. I made no mistake," coldly asseverated the witness, seeming a bit stung by those grimly sarcastic sentences. "If I was to fall dead the next moment, I'll take my solemn oath that Neil Vance said just that: '*Reeves—killed!*'"

There came a brief silence to follow this positive assertion.

Reuben Reeves gazed steadily into the face of the man who was swearing away his chance for life, but Jerome Felton met those glittering eyes without the slightest sign of flinching.

Then the old hunter slowly spoke in his turn:

"Ef *you* hain't lyin', then Neil Vance went to hell with a dirty dog lie onto the lips of him!"

Turning away from the witness as though he was through with him for all time, Reuben Reeves addressed those men now sitting in judgment over him, speaking in sober, but calm tones, more like one who held but a slight and passing interest in the matter, than one whose very life was at stake.

"You see, gents, it looks pritty much this-a-way. I never had a over-stock o' likin' fer young Vance, take him when he was at his best; but come late days, he give me plenty o' cause fer mislikin' him nigh as hot as any common critter *kin* hate 'nother man!"

"You are not obliged to incriminate yourself, Reeves," coldly said Eldridge, at the same time frowning a bit at Don Darling, as though to remind him of a neglected duty.

"That's all right, Mr. Eldridge," calmly said the accused. "I reckon you mean it well for me, but when a critter hain't never done ary thing to feel shame fer, or take skeer of, that critter can't do himself no great harm long's he sticks to the solid truth."

"It's the naked truth I'm gitting at now, nur I won't keep you hangin' onto the fence ary a bit longer'n I kin well help. An' so—it's jest like this, gentlemen."

"Neil Vance tried his level best to 'pose onto my little girl. She told me, an' I sent him warning, white fashion, to keep his own side o' the range, or I'd shoot him on sight if he tried it over!"

"Careful, Reeves! All you say now may come up against you, mind!"

"That's jest what I'm wantin'," bluntly declared the accused. "Ef they hadn't no more dirty dog lies fetched ag'inst me then you kin rake out o' my evidence, then the ole man's all right, fer keeps!"

"I left that warnin' with you, Mare Eldridge, beca'se I reckoned it wouldn't be 'zactly safe fer to hunt up Neil Vance while my hot streak was scorchin' me, yit. That was the same day Vance bothered my little girl, an' I'll take my Bible oath that I haven't set eyes onto Neil Vance from that time to this, a'ter he was layin' up yender, dead!"

Reuben Reeves paused, as though his story was told, but after a brief wait, Eldridge spoke up:

"Where were you when that death-cry rung out, prisoner?"

"Right by the split-top pine, on the rode to my place, sir."

"Which way were you going, then?"

"Gwine home."

"Who was with you at the time?"

"Nobody—but my gun," with a half-smile.

"Where had you been? Who did you pass the evening with?"

These queries came sharper, sterner, for less keen eyes could see that the old hunter was beginning to turn nervous under that inquisition, but instead of making frank reply as he had until then, the veteran once more declared his complete innocence of crime, adding almost savagely:

"An' right thar ye hev it all, dug-gun ye, critters! Ef I'd 'lowed to kill Neil Vance, would I 'a' used a *knife* when a *rifle's* so much sartainter? Would I—bah! Ye *know* I'm tellin' the sober truth, so whar's the use chewin' wind funder?"

Those questions were repeated, but in vain, for, the old hunter had sunk into moody silence from which no effort could draw him.

This was hardly an ending to be wished for, but those assembled to investigate the matter, evidently felt in duty bound to make some sort of report to the waiting crowd, and when it was seen nothing further could be extracted from the accused, they put their heads together for deliberation.

Among others, Ransom Eldridge offered his views, and as a matter of course they were listened to with no little respect by the citizens.

He argued that, while the evidence was quite sufficient to excuse them in holding Reeves for further examination, it would not fully justify them in pronouncing the extreme penalty due a murderer.

"If we all put together, gentlemen, we can keep anything like a mob from rising, and so disgracing our fair city by a lynching. After the prisoner has had time for reflection—"

"I never tetched the critter, an' that's all I kin say ef I was to take a holy year to do it in!" surlily cut in the old hunter.

In spite of this untimely averment, the wishes shaped by Mayor Eldridge were agreed to by the rest, and it was determined to hold the accused for further investigation, meanwhile keeping him under an armed guard, to prevent escape or lynching.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LOSING HIS NERVE.

AFTER this important point was settled upon, it was no very difficult matter for those having the matter in hand to reach an amicable understanding as to all minor conditions.

The mayor and David Wilkinson undertook to explain matters to the waiting citizens, and as there had been ample time in which to cool down their worst passions, this did not prove to be a very difficult task.

Mayor Eldridge took particular pains to impress upon the assembly that Reuben Reeves was being held for further investiga-

tion, and not because his guilt was considered fairly proven.

That was the rock on which a split, if any, was to come, and the announcement was greeted with more than one expression of open dissatisfaction: but when their own first choice for office, David Wilkinson, added his appeal to that of the mayor, all serious opposition died away.

With the formal understanding, then, that in due time a mass meeting of all the citizens should be called, in order to give the case the fullest possible consideration, it was agreed by all that Reuben Reeves should be held in custody of an armed guard, for the time being.

A temporarily vacant building in one of the more retired portions of the town was selected as jail, and a picked body of men were placed in charge, with implicit instructions not to permit a person to draw up to that building, without first showing a pass, signed by Mayor Eldridge, and countersigned by David Wilkinson.

After this fashion, then, the business was arranged for the time being; and still sternly silent, Reuben Reeves was marched under armed conduct from the mayor's office to the selected jail, their progress being marked by sundry menacing cries and thinly-veiled threats, but no serious opposition offered during that transfer.

When this was accomplished, Ransom Eldridge saw that care would be bestowed upon the murdered man for the night, and then, dropping a guarded whisper for Don Darling's benefit, and passing similar word to the surviving members of the Silver League, he contrived to shake off all others who had played a prominent part in the examination of the old hunter, and retraced his steps to his office.

The Denver Detective was already in waiting before that closed door, and to him the mayor said soberly:

"We'll go inside. The others will come soon, I reckon. I can't—how many more times like this, I wonder!"

His tones grew hoarse and strained at that, and he almost staggered as he stepped across the threshold.

So long as he was before the many eyes, Ransom Eldridge had worn a mask, but now it seemed as though the real man *must* show himself, if only for a brief space.

The lamp which had been extinguished when the accused was removed, quickly shed its light through that apartment, and the mayor was seated in a chair, his massive figure bowed, his face hidden in his hands, when one after another the three members of the Silver League kept the appointment made for them by their president.

Neither of the trio openly remarked as to that too evident depression, probably because they only too readily realized just what had caused it in one usually so well to the front in all matters.

The little bustle which naturally attended their arrival served to rouse the president, but his strong face showed unmistakable signs of sore worryment, in spite of the faint smile which he forced to greet their prompt acceptance of his rendezvous.

"I'm glad you've come, mates," he said, his voice sounding both subdued and husky, although something of his customary nerve was still displayed in keeping that organ steady. "I'm beginning to feel afraid of myself, even! And—until right now, I don't think I ever knew what it meant to be afraid of solitude!"

"It's a terrible affair—simply awful!" gloomily declared Creed Wallace.

"I'd think it even worse, if we hadn't caught the devil who laid poor Neil out, though!" contributed Andy Shelton.

Ransom Eldridge gave a slight start at this speech, and Jerome Felton shook his head as though involuntarily.

Don Darling saw both actions, and vailing his eyes a bit more with their lids, he watched and waited, brain busier than ever.

Surely neither of these men could actually doubt the guilt of Reuben Reeves, after playing the part they had in arrest and examination?

For a few moments silence reigned, then Eldridge broke it.

"Yarwood—Mahoney—Ashmole—Hunter—Vance!" he said, with a break between each pair of names. "Four murdered, the

other vanished, no one of us can say how or whence! Five from nine! Now—which one of the four still left in the Silver League is to make the next sensation?"

Each one of the trio stirred restlessly, interchanging quick glances, but not one of them ventured to reply to that gloomy question.

Ransom Eldridge gave a fierce, half-despairing gesture with a tightly clinched hand, then spoke again:

"Twice in one week have we had to ask this question! Only this forenoon poor Vance was wondering when we would come to the end of it all. And now—he has reached that awful end! And *we*—well, there is one point less for lightning to aim at!"

The Silver League president made a defiant gesture, but that, as well as the smile he forced to his face, could hardly be called genuine.

Jerome Felton caught up the thread thus let drop, and seemed desirous of giving his mates at least a modicum of relief, since he said:

"I can't look at it in the same light the rest of you appear to do, mates. I don't believe this is at all the same as the other. *They* were butchered—"

"What do you call *this*, then?" almost harshly cut in Shelton.

"Murder, no less, yet not like the others," doggedly insisted the swarthy, broad-shouldered member. "I believe with you all, that the others were killed simply because they belonged to the Silver League; but Neil Vance—that's different, or I'm widely astray in my reckoning!"

"I'd far rather think it that way, since the poor fellow had to go, anyway," huskily said Eldridge, with a faint lightening up of his face. "What makes *you* think it's different, Felton?"

"Vance didn't die because he belonged to the League, but because he was mad after a woman! You know what I mean, I reckon? Mad after a girl who never gave him a single thought that way!"

"The Reeves girl, you mean?"

"Yes. You know what the old man said, to-night? He told the truth, so far, didn't he?"

"About leaving a word of warning for Vance with me, yes," admitted the mayor, promptly enough, but his face clouding again.

"You passed the word on, and Neil promised to heed it. I know, for he talked it all over with me, later. And I—I warned him, too! I told him that a man who had led the life Rube Reeves had, was to be feared more than a sleeping rattler: touch him, once, and it meant sudden death without further sound or warning!"

Jerome Felton spoke swiftly, earnestly, and seemed to fully believe his solution of that tragedy was the only one possible to take; but not so the president.

He listened, but without a sign of conviction. And when the burly member ceased speaking, his head shook in negation.

"It's easy to see that you believe you've caught the rights of it, Felton, but I can't agree with you in this."

"What!" in strong surprise. "Don't you believe that Reeves killed Neil Vance, then?"

There was a slight hesitation perceptible, but then the mayor made answer, slowly and gravely:

"I'm not saying just *that*, either, friend. What I can't make seem true is that poor Vance came by his death through his fancy for the Reeves girl."

"Why else would the old man down him, though?"

Eldridge made a passionate gesture at this.

"*Why?* Isn't it all a part of this infernal mystery which is eating the very life out of me? Twice in one week! Another member gone—another share of Climax stock to be taken up!"

As though his blood was firing past quiet endurance, Mayor Eldridge sprung to his feet, his face flushing redly, his eyes all aglow, his voice sounding harsh and strained as he said:

"I've fought against the awful feeling, men, until it seems as though I'd go crazy! I've tried to hold out—I've said the end *must* surely come soon, when all would be

cleared away, but—bah!" with a short, strange laugh as he flung out one trembling hand: "Sounds cowardly, don't it? But it's gospel truth: *I'm beginning to lose my nerve!*"

This was so different from anything they had ever seen in Mayor Eldridge, that the other members of the Silver League were taken all aback, even Felton seeming at a loss what to do or what to say.

As for Don Darling, he remained in the background, as he had from the beginning. It seemed the wisest thing he could do under the circumstances; and then, too, he was not entirely idle.

Whether it was the relief won through this open confession of a weakness which, as their manner so plainly indicated, not one of the Silver League had considered in him, or whether he regretted so plainly betraying that weakness, Ransom Eldridge quickly rallied himself, and in a tone and manner more nearly like his usual self, he spoke again:

"I had to let it out, friends, but now—I'm ready to fight it out along this line, if it takes us all to eternity!"

"We've got the murderer, and caught him red-handed at that," said Shelton, with a degree of rancor unusual for one of his jolly, frank disposition. "When old Reeves croaks, the end *has* come, I take it!"

"I'm with you there, Andrew, man!" cut in Creed Wallace. "Why wait over night, though? Why not avenge poor Vance out of hand?"

"And by forever closing the old man's lips, maybe leave the devil's mystery blinder than ever!" almost fiercely cried the president.

"You think there are others in it, then, Eldridge?" asked Felton.

"You *know* I do, man! You *all* know what I have come to firmly believe, almost from the beginning of this terrible affair—that both Madam Silver and Fred Freestone are mixed up in it, even if they are not the actual assassins!"

"And you count on—what?"

"I believe we have caught a clue at last, which may lead up to the end we've all been hoping and striving for," came the stern response. "I believe that the Silver Horn pards are at the bottom of the whole trouble, and that if old Reeves has become mixed up in it at all before this night's work, he is merely a hired tool."

"We've got him foul now! A word in the right direction would have sent him up a tree, too, mighty sudden! But—*isn't* it better to hang fast to him until we can coax or frighten the whole truth out of him?"

"He isn't a fellow that scares so easy, though," moodily muttered Jerome Felton. "And he surely *did* down Neil Vance!"

"I know, to both points made," gravely acknowledged Eldridge. "But so far as I can see now, that's our only chance for getting at the bottom facts, and until we can do *that*, we are walking over sudden death at each step we take! And so—Hark!"

From some little distance, yet still inside of town, there came an ominous sound: the death-roar of lynch law it seemed!

CHAPTER XXIV!

ANOTHER PUZZLE TO SOLVE.

DON DARLING sprang to his feet as that ominous sound came from out the night, and for the first time since that reunion he cried aloud:

"That sounds as though a mob was rising! Come, men! We mustn't let the old fellow die that fashion!"

"Not if we can save his life for better use!" cried Mayor Eldridge, as he caught up his hat from where it had dropped unheeded to the floor, together with the gold-handled cane, which he almost invariably carried while abroad night and day.

Without waiting to see what effect his swift appeal would have, the Denver Detective sprang to the door, turned the key in the lock, flung the barrier wide, then sprang into the street.

Eldridge was first to follow, and his hand dropped on a shoulder as Darling bent his head in listening.

Just then there was silence, but only for a few seconds. Then ugly cries and shouts broke forth afresh, and even a novice who had witnessed any portion of that night's

happenings could hardly have misinterpreted those sounds.

But both men drew relieved breaths, for out here in the open air it was far easier to judge than in yonder behind closed doors.

"It's not a regular mob as yet," declared Darling as he noted how scattered those sounds were. "Still we'd better get on guard, for once men of that sort *do* form a mob, it's terribly hard to block their way!"

"You're right, Darling," crisply cried the mayor, then to his other friends: "Across to the jail, lads! It's there the trouble must show itself to be really dangerous; and with us to the fore—*no lynch law for to-night, remember!*"

Darling and Eldridge stuck together more closely than any of the others, it seemed, whether through chance or by design is not so certain.

They were first at the frame building which had been selected as quarters for the accused for the time being, but found all in order at that place.

"I don't reckon it means anything wuss then bad wind, boss," coolly said one of the chosen guards. "Still, ef it means old business, they'll find we're here fu'st!"

It is such talk that lends confidence, and feeling more at ease in his mind now that he knew the picked guard would do their duty in case serious trouble should actually arise, the mayor ventured to press his investigations further, after consulting with his fellow members.

"Spread out and cover more ground," formed a portion of his instructions. "Cool off any one you find shooting his mouth too loudly, but don't get mixed up in a row if you can well avoid it. Still, *if you must*, make your work count for *our* side!"

But, as investigation proved, the threatened outbreak of lynch law was confined to some half dozen or more fellows who had taken more bad whisky than their wits could counterbalance, and the supposed danger was easily enough handled without either the mayor or the Denver Detective openly interfering.

Don Darling followed the lead of the mayor until these facts were made clear, and then, being assured by David Wilkinson that his committee would see to the immunity of Reuben Reeves from mob law, the two men dismissed that fear from their list of possible perils.

For the first time since the discovery he had so unexpectedly made while Dr. Brewster was examining the body of Neil Vance, Don Darling had a chance offered him to mention the strange recovery of his stolen note-book.

As previously stated, he had mentioned that loss to his host, shortly after his nocturnal adventure; but until this night he had been totally unable to divine whose hands had taken that property.

As they were walking slowly through town toward the mayor's residence, Darling brought up the matter, but Eldridge seemed to attach far less importance to the discovery than did Darling himself.

"Why should *he* assault me, that fashion, though?" persisted the Denver Detective. "And, having assaulted me, why steal what was to him but a trifle worth?"

Eldridge gave himself a sudden shake, as though to rouse up wits through stirring his body. And then he suggested:

"May it not have been all a mistake, Darling?"

"In what respect, pray?"

"Well, you know what Felton said, and you also heard the warning left for poor Neil with me, by Reeves. Vance was really half-crazy over that girl, you must understand?"

"And you think he saw me creeping about the cabin, that night?"

"I *do* think so, now that you've found he had your memorandum-book."

Don Darling gave a low whistle as the possible truth flashed upon his mind. A jealous lover, a mistaken identity, a hasty blow! But—

"If he mistook me for a rival, I can understand *the blow*, but how about *the theft*?"

"That may have been in hopes to cover up his mistake," thoughtfully suggested the mayor. "He recognized you, of course, and then took what he did to make you think 'twas a case of robbery, pure and simple."

Looked at from that point, the solution seemed fairly plausible, although such an

explanation said very little for the morals of the youngest member of the Silver League.

By the time this solution was arrived at, the two men came to the mayor's residence, and while Eldridge passed inside, to cleanse his hands which had become stained with blood from the veins of the murdered man, Don Darling sat down upon the steps, lighting a fresh cigar and giving himself over to deep and grave thoughts.

There passed in swift review the main events of that evening, and as he came to the defense offered by the old hunter, he could not fully believe in his guilt.

"It was a *man* talking, then!" the detective told himself. "There was nothing of the cur or the criminal about it. I'd sooner think—but what interest could *he* possibly have in killing Vance?"

It was of Jerome Felton Don Darling was thinking, just then, for he could not help contrasting the demeanor of the two: accused and accuser.

All to the disadvantage of the latter, too!

And yet, as he asked himself, what possible interest could Jerome Felton have in putting Neil Vance out of the way?

Unless—was it another instance of unbridled jealousy? As Neil Vance had feloniously assaulted Darling on suspicion of rivalry, was it altogether impossible that Felton had dealt that death-blow through the same misguided passion?

"It surely *can't* be that way!" the detective told himself, rising to his feet and walking nervously to and fro. "Even if he was in love with Miss Reeves—*ha!*"

The detective gave a start as the thought of that person brought to mind another matter which surely ought to be looked after.

"Has any one carried word to Miss Reeves? Her father never asked that she be notified, that I caught! And yet—it'd be a terrible blow to the poor child if any coarse, blunt person should blurt it out about his arrest on the charge of murder!"

Even while these thoughts were flashing swiftly through his brain, Don Darling unconsciously sprang into action, striding rapidly away from the spot where no doubt the mayor fully expected to find him, shortly; and almost before he realized the fact, he was well on his way to the cabin home of the old hunter.

Although he had never interchanged a word with her, Don Darling had seen Ethel Reeves several times since that first glimpse of the maiden through the cabin window.

It would be entirely too much to insinuate that the Dandy from Denver had fallen in love with this fair mountain maid; but it is well within bounds to state that he *had* learned to admire her, if for her piquant style of beauty alone.

It was with a sentiment of strong pity and warm sympathy that the detective now hurried along through the night, bound upon a mission of mercy. Since the poor child must learn the bitter truth, better hear the words from kindly lips than from those of a mere sensation-monger.

But it was fated to be different from what Don Darling pictured to himself while on the way: the mountain cabin was occupied, but the figure which came staggering out through the open doorway, most certainly was not Ethel Reeves!

"Halt!" sharply challenged the detective, pistol leaping out and catching the drop with wonderful swiftness; but then, as he recognized that burly figure, he added: "You, Felton? What's up, now?"

"More devil's work, or I'm way off my nut!" hoarsely answered the other, as he recognized his interlocutor. "*The girl's gone!*"

"Gone?" echoed Darling, with a strange pang shooting through his heart, but which he was too greatly worked up just then to interpret aright. "Gone where? Gone how?"

"You tell, and I'll make it mighty well worth your while, Darling," said Felton, in more natural tones. "I've taken a hasty look, but couldn't find anything to tell—wonder if that old devil sent her off first?"

There was a sudden fire leaping into his eyes as this idea presented itself, and without waiting for more, he sprang past the Denver Detective, and hastened away in the direction of the town.

Darling hesitated for barely a second. He saw that Felton was in desperate earnest just now, and feeling that the right clue might be more readily found at the other end of the line, he sprung after the member of the Silver League, rapidly cutting down that short lead, and while easily keeping pace with Felton, questioning him as to what had brought him to the mountain cabin just then.

"What fetched you, then?" gruffly retorted the fellow.

"I went to break the news of her father's arrest."

This frank admission set Felton a good example, and he quickly explained his presence after the self-same fashion. But he found the cabin deserted, the door wide open, which fact alone was sufficient to awaken his fears that something had gone seriously wrong.

"She may have heard, and so hurried down to join her father," suggested the detective, although his sinking heart flatly refused to accept that harmless solution.

After this no words were spoken until their race against time was completed, and promptly halting at the stern challenge of the guards on duty over Reuben Reeves, Jerome Felton swiftly explained for both men.

As the guards knew what a prominent part both Felton and Darling had taken in the capture and examination of the old hunter, they showed less reluctance about giving them admittance to the room where Reuben Reeves was under personal watch of two armed men.

Of course it was out of order, this granting such permission at all, but at best they were only amateur officers of the law, and when two men of such caliber asked it as a favor, how could they refuse?

Opening the door, the messengers of evil were admitted, and as the old hunter looked up from where he was squatting, at their entrance, Felton bluntly asked him where Ethel had gone.

More thoughtful, Darling explained their mission, and for a brief space the father seemed fairly dazed by this fresh stroke of fate. But then, leaping like a maddened panther upon Jerome Felton, he gripped his throat, throwing him down and throttling him while savagely crying:

"It's all part o' yer game, ye cussed houn' dog! Hang me—steal her—but I'll kill ye fu'st, dug-gun ye!"

CHAPTER XXV.

GETTING ALL TANGLED UP.

So swiftly was this attack made that all others were taken by surprise, and Jerome Felton, seemingly powerful enough to crush the old hunter as one might snap a dried weed, went down beneath that quivering heap of savage hatred with hardly an effort at resistance.

Reuben Reeves was furiously in earnest, however, and had they been left to settle the matter for themselves, Felton could only have escaped death by throttling, through making use of knife or pistol.

But Don Darling was almost as swift to act as the veteran had been, and grappling with Reeves, who seemed more like a madman than aught of sanity, he contrived to gain the upper hand before the amazed guards could rally their with sufficiently to come to the rescue.

"Let up, man!" he cried, sternly, as he dragged Reeves back from the half-throttled member of the Silver League. "Can't you tell friend from enemy, that you twist a noose for your own neck, this way?"

"I hain't—let up you!" raged the old hunter, striving to break away from the one who had taken him so wholly at a disadvantage. "He's stole my honey bird, an' I'll—let up, or I'll be the death o' ye!"

By this time the guards came to Darling's assistance, and in the powerful excitement which reigned, Reuben Reeves might easily have fared but illy, had not Jerome Felton himself interfered on his behalf.

"Don't harm—he's crazy, but don't hurt him!"

Even against such heavy odds, Reeves was making a fight as fierce as it was hopeless, and with the odds of three to one, Darling and his now assistants found it anything but an easy matter to subdue the old

Indian-fighter without injuring him materially.

They were just winning the victory when another interested person came upon the scene, and without pausing for ceremony or to give the regular password, Ransom Eldridge sprung to the front, sternly demanding an explanation of the row.

"Talk out, and talk white!" he menaced, gun in hand as he flashed eyes from one to another, "You, Darling? And—Felton!"

"Devil roast him by inches!" panted Reuben Reeves, hoarse and worn, yet with spirit unbroken and hatred hotter than ever.

"Whar's my honey bird? Whar's my little lady gal? Whar's—make him fess, or the death cuss of a daddy ha'n't ye one an' all through eternity!"

Jerome Felton seemed deaf to those fierce menaces, and hardly paying any notice to the president of the Silver League, he hoarsely asked Reuben Reeves:

"You tell—where is Ethel, old man? If you run her off before—did you, man?"

The only answer was another desperate effort to get at the speaker, which ended only when Reeves was completely exhausted, and the now thoroughly angered guards had hastily bound his arms with a bit of rope which came handy to their reach.

While they were doing this, Ransom Eldridge warned them repeatedly against injuring the old man, or using more force than was absolutely necessary.

Not until this was fairly accomplished could there be anything like a calm explanation on either side, but when the guards drew back, leaving the old hunter helpless for the time being, Mayor Eldridge almost harshly demanded an explanation from those engaged in this unexpected affair.

"You, Darling—and Felton! What brought you here at this hour, without the pass agreed upon? And—what means all this racket?"

The two men thus called upon by name glanced at each other, and as the Denver Detective made a slight bow, the member of the Silver League spoke first.

"Darling can bear me out in it all, Eldridge, if my word needs backing up," began Felton, his voice betraying a degree of emotion which was seldom exhibited by the man. "I thought Miss Reeves ought to know what was keeping her father, and so—I went over there. But—I found the door open, the house empty, things all in disorder, like! And then—I ran hot-foot down this way to see if Reeves knew anything about the matter."

"A dirty dog lie! A dirty dog liar!" harshly cried the ex-trapper, at this. "It's all a foul trick to ruin—Whar's my pore gal, ye houn' dog o' sin an' deviltry? Make him tell, Mare Eldridge! Make him fetch back my pore honey bird, or I'll cuss ye all from now clean through eternity!"

"Make him tell, rather!" harshly amended Jerome Felton, his strong hands clinching until it seemed as though the tensely drawn skin must burst. "If he didn't run Ethel off—"

"A lie—a dirty dog lie! It's all a trick to—make him fess up, Ran. Eldridge, or take my never-endin' cusses fer playin' me all over dirt!"

From face to face the mayor was flashing his brown eyes, seemingly at a loss to decide between them. With a quieting gesture for Jerome Felton, he spoke to the prisoner:

"Do you mean to say that you had no prior knowledge of Miss Ethel's disappearance, Reeves? Don't you know?"

"I never then, but I do now!" cut in the prisoner, his voice hoarse with intense rage and hatred. "It's all a dirty dog scheme fer to break me all up, an' git my pore little gal whar—Kill me, ye devils! Kill me while you've got the bulge, or I'll prove heap sight wuss to ye all then the blind killer hes bin!"

This threat came with a vicious intensity which baffles description, and strong, bold, resourceful man though all Chloride knew him to be, Ransom Eldridge drew back, with a visible shudder!

Noting this, and feeling an intense interest in the welfare of the missing maiden, Don Darling came to the front, but with little better success than had rewarded the mayor.

Reuben Reeves plainly deemed all opposed

to him, and with his jaws tightly locked, he glared defiance at one and all.

The Denver Detective told how he had hastened to the mountain cabin for that friendly purpose, but failed to see aught of Miss Reeves. And then he explained what followed, just as Jerome Felton had done before him.

The only difference in the reception of the twain was that Darling received silent curses, where Felton had them aloud!

Realizing at length that they could hope for nothing better than this, the party withdrew, and the door was closed upon the old man against whom such a terrible charge rested.

With a bit greater sternness than was customary with him, Mayor Eldridge gave orders for the guard-line to be more carefully drawn, and to permit none through without they first showed the regular pass, signed by David Wilkinson and himself.

"Don't pester the old man with too many questions," he added, after a brief pause, during which he seemed to be deliberating busily. "Still, if he should betray any inclination to talk, try to draw him into telling what he knows of the affair: where his girl has gone, or been sent."

Taken down a peg or two by having so rankly disobeyed their orders concerning the password, the picked men promised to do all that lay in their power, and then, with a gesture which commanded Darling and Felton to follow, the mayor moved away from that spot.

But the swarthy member of the Silver League seemed far too deeply moved for long silence, and burst out with:

"That girl—what can we do for her, Eldridge?"

"Is it so certain she wants us to do anything, though?" moodily asked the mayor.

"She's gone—and from the way things looked there in the cabin, I could almost make oath she never left of her own accord!" persisted Felton, his fingers closing and opening with fierce nervousness.

"What notion took you over there at such an hour, Jerome?" asked Eldridge, with a different tone of voice from anything he had used, of late. "I thought you had gone—"

"Didn't I tell you why?" with an impatient gesture. "When I remembered no word had been sent Miss Reeves, I reckoned—I couldn't help thinking 'twould be no more than right—and decent, don't you see?"

Felton spoke after a fashion unusual for him. Usually so cool and imperturbable, his voice trembled and caught, and even by the moonlight his hot flush was plainly perceptible.

Don Darling felt an odd thrill of resentment as he saw this, and Ransom Eldridge gave a low, prolonged whistle as though his eyes were beginning to open to an, as yet, unsuspected truth.

"Is that it, pardner?" he uttered, slowly, in keeping with that note of half-amused surprise.

"That's it, if you take that way of looking at it," almost doggedly answered Felton; then adding: "What can we do, first? It's a burning shame if we don't act, but—how can we?"

"And how do we know that our action is wanted, Jerome?"

"Oh, curse your infernal coolness, Ran. Eldridge!" burst forth the other, hotly.

"The girl is gone, and everything about the place shows that she went against her will! So—what ought we to do, first?"

"What can we do, though?"

"That's what's eating me!" passionately cried Felton, with another savage gesture. "I know that something ought to be done, but what? There seems no clue to work on! What way turn first? Who to suspect?"

There came no immediate answer to these questions. Neither Darling nor Eldridge seemed capable of offering a plausible solution to this fresh enigma, and after waiting for a few moments in hopes of gaining at least a hint to act upon, Felton again broke forth:

"I've got to do something, if it's only play-work! I can't—for the last time, Eldridge, help me out! How can I help Ethel Reeves?"

"What can you do, Jerome, without even the ghost of a clue to guide your search?" gravely asked the mayor.

With his last hope cut off from that quarter, Jerome Felton hung his head dejectedly for a few seconds, seemingly thinking what else remained for him. Then, with a swift breath he cried:

"I can't take it cool as you do, Eldridge! I've got to do something if it's only make believe!"

Without waiting to hear or see more, Felton turned away and swiftly passed beyond their range of vision, leaving the two men more thoroughly puzzled than before.

"If he hasn't turned crazy all of a sudden, then I'd like to know the reason!" ejaculated the mayor, drawing a long breath as he turned toward the Denver Detective, like one seeking light.

"Looks more like a case of love," grimly declared Darling, his lip curling oddly as he mentioned the ailment. "Didn't he show anything of the sort before?"

"Love?" echoed the mayor, in tones of strong surprise. "You don't mean—surely not old Reeves's girl, man?"

"Looks sort o' like it, to me, anyway. Either love or lunacy, and I'm not so mighty sure the terms aren't synonymous!"

Grimly, even surlily came those closing words, but Eldridge seemed to look for no deeper meaning than lay on their surface.

"In love! Felton? And with Ethel—Well, I *do* wonder!"

He started in motion once more, while giving vent to his broken soliloquy, and for some rods the two men progressed without either one saying aught further. But then Don Darling gave a little start, crying:

"I wonder if—"

"You wonder what?" asked Eldridge, as the detective paused abruptly without finishing his sentence.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MORE OF THE SILVER QUEEN.

"I WONDER why Neil Vance risked carrying my note-book on his person all the time?"

Whether or not this was precisely what the Denver Detective had set out to say, may well be doubted, but the answer came so promptly that, even if he was not entirely satisfied with it, Ransom Eldridge had no reasonable excuse for showing that doubt.

"Possibly he meant to restore it to you, when he found a fair opportunity for acknowledging his foolish mistake," gravely suggested the Silver League president.

"That sounds something like it, for a fact," frankly admitted the Dandy from Denver. "Reckon he was ashamed to own up, *too* soon. And then—wonder if he could have suspected that Felton had a longing eye out that same way?"

"I can hardly bring myself to believe it, yet!" moodily declared the mayor, his pace slackening as if unconsciously, to give his brain freer play. "In love—Jerome Felton!"

Silence reigned for a few moments, to be broken by Darling, who half-doubtfully said:

"I wonder if I'd better tell you just what thought it was that struck me, back yonder Eldridge?"

"I think I could come within a mile of it, on a blind guess," coolly asserted the mayor, showing hardly any interest, how ever.

"Then—I didn't throw you wholly off the scent?"

"Shall I give you proof, Darling?"

"If you can—yes!"

"You was wondering whether it could be possible that their fancy for the Reeves girl had brought about a collision between Felton and Vance," quietly said the mayor. "How far wide am I, Darling?"

"Not quite so far as I was when I thought to blind you by a false double," frankly admitted the Dandy from Denver. "What do you think of it, anyway, Eldridge?"

"I've been thinking of it for some little time, Darling, but I can't make it come out that way," gravely answered the Mayor of Chloride. "I will admit—now that you have set me the example of candor—that I rather more than suspected both lads were in love with the same girl, and that I never

dreamed of that fancy ever causing trouble between two such close friends."

"And now?"

"My opinion is still the same. Even now I *can't* think that Jerome Felton would lift weapon against Neil Vance, much less murder him in such a dastardly fashion as this would prove!"

"He was first on the spot, though!" thoughtfully said the detective as though unable to wholly dismiss that theory.

"After the assassin, yes!"

"You mean old Reeves?"

Eldridge hesitated now, but not for long. He cast a searching look around on all sides, like one who feels he is about to express sentiment of more than ordinary danger; but seeing no signs of eavesdroppers or any moving person, he drew a bit closer to Darling, even bearing a portion of his weight upon that arm as he lowly uttered:

"I tell you now, what I've told you before, Darling: I firmly believe that when the whole truth comes out—as it surely *must*, soon or later—I honestly believe that Madam Silver is at the bottom of all this murderous scheme!"

"It hardly seems possible," thoughtfully said Darling. "She, a woman! 'Twould try the nerves of the boldest of mankind, Eldridge!"

"I know that. I know, too, that there are a few women who can give the boldest, wickedest of all men odds and a beating at aught which calls for pure nerve and unadulterated gall!"

He paused, as though expecting some comment or observation from the detective, but as none such was forthcoming, he added:

"Mind you, Darling, I'm not saying that the Silver Queen has dealt every one of these awful blows with her own hand. She doubtless has confederates. If I am right, Fred Freestone is a prominent tool, always ready to her hand and for her bidding!"

"And you think Reeves is another?" asked the Denver Detective, as they paused in front of the house toward which their steps had been slowly trending all this time.

They mayor waved a hand in silent invitation, then sat down on the low, broad step leading to the porch-level.

"Just as well out here as inside, don't you reckon, Darling?"

"Better, to my notion," as he likewise took a seat. "Unless that factotum of yours—"

"Dick Lane? Too deaf to hear, even should he be awake, which is supposing a genuine miracle," amusedly declared the proprietor of the place; then adding, more gravely: "About Reeves; yes, I *do* think he is another tool fitted to the cunning hand of Madam Silver!"

"Doesn't it look a bit oddly that no one from the Silver Horn showed up, during all that racket over yonder?" thoughtfully asked the Denver Detective. "They surely must have known something out of the usual run was afoot!"

"Why wouldn't they know it, then? But it seems to be part of their rule to hold aloof from all disturbances which find a source outside of their own stamping grounds. I'll do them that much credit, you see!" with a low, odd chuckle.

"Safer, at any rate," crisply commented the detective.

"That's one way of looking at it, of course! But—about Reuben Reeves. If he is really one of Madam Silver's tools, and she egged him on to down poor Vance for keeps, there is still more fun to come!"

"What do you mean by that, Eldridge?"

"That if I'm guessing correctly as to the true inwardness of this last murder, the Silver Queen will be afraid to desert her tool, now that he has fallen into sore trouble, lest old Reeves play even by peaching on her, and giving away the whole scheme!"

In a low but almost painfully distinct whisper came these words, and through the shadow where they were sitting, Don Darling could detect the reddish, almost cat-like glow of those big brown eyes.

The Denver Detective seemed deeply impressed by words or by manner, for he sat in silence for some little time, evidently meditating over the point thus presented for thought.

Ransom Eldridge permitted him to do so, for a certain length of time, but after fidget-

ing uneasily for a few seconds when that reasonable limit was overpassed, he broke the silence in tones a bit colder and more metallic than usual:

"Isn't it about time you were making some sort of report as to progress made with the case, Mr. Darling? You surely ought to have learned something by this time!"

"I really think I have, Mr. Eldridge," came the quiet response.

"Good! You've asked plenty of questions, and looked into our hands often enough, gracious knows! And all the time you've kept lock and seal over your tongue, until—well, let that pass, then," with a short, dry laugh as the Denver Detective made a deprecatory gesture.

"That's really part of our stock in trade, don't you know, Eldridge! If I were to talk *all* the time, when could I be listening?"

"That's all right, Darling. I'm not kicking about your keeping secrets from all Chloride, but—surely I ought to form an exception. At least, in part. So—when will you be ready to fully unmask the Silver Queen?"

Eagerly, though trying to veil that eagerness, Eldridge asked this question, but Don Darling made no objection as to replying, for he responded:

"Very soon, I fully hope and expect, Mr. Eldridge. Still, you can't expect me, nor would I consent to, spring the trap without first making dead sure I had the game beyond all possibility of its escaping my grip."

As he said this, Darling rose to his feet, giving his arms a stretch, and adding:

"I reckon I feel just like taking a bit of a walk before bunking in, but don't bother to wait up for me, Eldridge."

Before the mayor could ask a question as to his destination, or propose joining him in that little stroll, the Denver Detective strode away, heading for the main portion of Chloride City.

When he came to the first cover which would screen his action, Don Darling cast a look backward, giving a little grunt of grim satisfaction as he caught a glimpse of the mayor still standing where so unceremoniously deserted.

"Wonder if that sticks in his craw?" mused the detective, as he proceeded, turning at an abrupt angle as soon as he was fairly out of sight of the Eldridge place. "Can't help it, if it does. I want quiet—and plenty of elbow-room for thinking this all over!"

In sober truth, this was the main reason why the man from Denver had deserted his host so abruptly. He felt that matters were constantly growing more complicated and worse tangled up. He needed solitude for close thinking, and he could best do that while in motion, not cooped up inside of four walls.

Don Darling hardly knew just what course his feet were taking, but they unconsciously led him into the regular stage road as he struck it at the edge of town.

Moving briskly along this, heedless of time, place or direction, the professional hunter of men pondered deeply over the intricate affair which he had journeyed so far to solve.

From the very outset it had presented a number of strange, if not actually unique phases; and ever since the case had seemed growing more and more complicated, less and less easy to find a plausible solution for.

The silent killing of Pike Hunter. The noiseless shot which dented the shirt of mail, that defense alone saving Ransom Eldridge from going down in an equally mysterious death! And now—the stabbing to death of Neil Vance, likewise a member of that same Silver League!

Adding these three important happenings to all that had gone before, and the sum total was enough to daunt almost any detective.

Darling was busily brooding over the case, when there came to his hearing the faint, far-off sound of hoofstrokes, and roused out of his deeply absorbing thoughts, the Denver Detective glanced hastily around, for the instant unable to place himself.

"The stage road! And—rider coming from *that* direction!" he muttered, his right hand mechanically feeling for the revolver he habitually carried while on duty. "I wonder—at this hour of the night!"

Those hoofstrokes were momentarily growing more distinct, and making sure that they were coming his way, or in the direction of town, Don hastily sought cover, crouching under a thick bush which grew only a couple of feet away from the inner edge of the trail.

This action was almost instinctive, for he had no idea who it was likely to prove, riding at that late hour; but even an honest man may be excused for declining to meet strangers at such a time and place.

Darling had a fair view of the road for several rods, and, as the rider came within that distance, he gave a sudden start, for he was almost sure—*quite certain*, now! And with a cry to halt, he sprung out in front of the rider, catching at the bridle-reins with his unarmed hand, only to be struck down by a swift blow, as the rider dashed onward.

"*The Silver Queen*, by glory!" Darling panted, scrambling to his feet.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DANDY STRIKES A CLUE.

It was this firm belief in the sex of that rider which kept the man from Denver from making use of the revolver which his right hand still gripped as he arose so hastily.

He had gone down before the stroke of a club, or heavy whip, or some similar dull weapon: possibly a firearm of some sort: but that downfall was owing more to the furious plunge onward of the horse, than to any particular prowess of the rider.

The alert detective was afoot again in good time to try a running shot at that rider, but he made no such attempt. Besides feeling confident he had to do with a woman, there was his professional pride; he would unmask the Silver Queen living, not dead!

This adventure, however, put an end to Darling's walking study, and he retraced his steps to the house, finding Eldridge waiting his arrival, but asking no questions in words.

One keen look of inquiry, to which the detective shook a head just as silent, then the two men entered the house and went to their beds.

The only special happening which marked the next day was the burial of Neil Vance, the arrangements of which were much the same as had marked the interment of Pike Hunter.

After this, there was a meeting of the surviving members of the Silver League and the citizens' committee, when a full discussion concerning the charge brought against Reuben Reeves was had.

Now, as before, Don Darling formed a silent member of that tribunal; but as he had no evidence to offer, just so he made no suggestion, contenting himself with taking mental notes, and watching each speaker in turn.

The Denver Detective said nothing to Eldridge concerning his latest adventure, but it was not long absent from his mind. For one thing, he could not help thinking the nocturnal expedition from which the Silver Queen was returning when he attempted her halting, had something to do with the as yet unexplained disappearance of Ethel Reeves.

During the day in question, Darling made several attempts to catch a glimpse of Madam Silver, but in vain. She was not visible about the Silver Horn, and with no more valid excuse than he had to offer, the Dandy from Denver hardly dared ask personally for her.

Darling paid a visit to the cabin at "the truck patch," entering the deserted home and making a critical examination of the place; but if he really hoped to catch a clue as to whither, how, when Ethel Reeves had gone, he was fated to suffer disappointment.

The more he thought over the matter—and it almost amazed himself when he found how tenaciously the maiden's strange flitting held possession of his mind—the more Don Darling wondered how far the Silver Queen had ridden that past night.

The result was that having found nothing to solve the puzzle there at the cabin home, he passed across to the stage road, and wandered quite a little distance from Chloride City.

It was a blind search, at best, and finally realizing as much, Don Darling left that road, striking across the rougher ground, heading more directly for town, and so guarding against observation from any per-

sons who might have business along the trail that afternoon.

It seemed purely chance that brought all this about, just as it seemed a bit of rare good-luck when the faint, yet not very far-away whimper of a horse came to the hearing of the Denver Detective.

Don Darling went down to earth even more swiftly than when the Silver Queen gave him her compliments in exchange for that road-agent-like summons to halt; but nevertheless he had fairly well located that odd sound; odd, because no sensible person would ever think to find horses there in such difficult ground.

It was not far from dusk, for the sun had passed out of sight behind the high ground west of Chloride City. This was a totally new portion of the country for Don Darling, but as he carefully scanned the lay of the ground in that direction, he became convinced that, after all, this spot could not be so very far from the stage-road, recalling a curve which that road made somewhere near that section of hills.

With this as a basis for action, the Denver Detective undertook to see without being seen, and thanks to his scouting skill, finally won his point.

Instead of one horse, there were three animals, each one saddled and bridled, ready for the road, all in charge of a single man, whose face he could not glimpse, without running too great a risk of discovery on the other side.

While he was still pondering over the matter, wondering if this had aught to do with the disappearance of Ethel Reeves, and if so, whether that flitting was the work of friend or foe to the maiden, Don Darling was fairly electrified by the sudden appearance of another human shape in the direction of the road.

At first the dusk prevented his making out for certain just who the new-comer was, but by cautiously shifting his position for another more favorably located, he not only saw, but heard!

A strange thrill crept over him as he recognized the Silver Queen, although she was garbed in dark stuff, now, and he was unable to tell whether she wore her mask of woven silver or not. But her regal shape could not be mistaken by one who had studied it so carefully, and even before he caught her words, the shadower was convinced as to her identity.

He had lost nearly all through the necessity for changing his covert, and he caught but the concluding words of direction:

"Hold everything in readiness for moving at the first sound, Wilson. Don't neglect; it may mean life or death for us all!"

The horse guard promised to be on the alert, and without further words, the Silver Queen took her departure, in the same direction from whence she had come.

Naturally enough Don Darling wished that he had won more light on a still dark subject; but little was better than none, and after doing some very rapid thinking, he resolved to await the result right where he now found himself.

It was a tedious spell of waiting, even for one so deeply interested as Don Darling had become; and more than once he wished he had a better knowledge of the programme, so he could venture further.

He had pretty well convinced himself that the Silver Queen was planning the rescue of Reeves, and when the time for action came, he knew that his theory was correct, that far; for from the direction of Chloride City there came the ruddy glow of a fire of no mean size, and as though this formed the signal for which he was waiting, the guard hurriedly took the three horses down to the stage road, where he had not long to wait before the animals were claimed by three persons.

Don Darling recognized the Silver Queen and Reuben Reeves, with a third party, and as they mounted and rode away along the trail, he muttered:

"I'll keep on track now, or break a lung trying! Time is coming for unmasking the Silver Queen, sure!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SILVER QUEEN'S STORY.

THAT same night was not entirely spent, although it was long past midnight, when,

far away from the point where the trio mounted the animals which had been provided for their speedy flight, a little gathering was shone upon by a small fire of dry sticks which blazed upon the stone hearth of a long-ago deserted mountain shack.

There was a story connected with that cabin, and with the caved-in prospect-hole where more than one fond human hope lay buried until eternity; but *that* is another tale, and has nothing to do with the present gathering, save in a measure to explain how they had found a secure and secluded shelter there for the present.

That ruddy glow was reflected from the silver mask which that strange goddess of the Silver Horn wore, and the same light revealed a younger, more charming face, now leaning against the shoulder of old Reuben Reeves—the face of Ethel, the missing maiden!

To one side, leaning silently against the rude log-and-stone wall, was Fred Freestone, but in a rough, coarse suit such as he had never been suspected of wearing in Chloride City.

Madam Silver was speaking, the others were listening.

"The time has come when I must keep the promise I made you both, my friends," she said, staring into the fire as though from there she might draw visions of the eventful past. "It is not an agreeable tale I have to narrate, but—'tis gospel truth!"

Madam Silver caught her breath sharply, as though overtaken by a pain as severe as it was sudden; but conquering this as quickly, she added with much the same cold, forced composure:

"Years ago—never mind just how many—there was a woman, married to the man of her heart's choice. Never mind their names, either. If you ask for them, later on, I may tell you. For now—the story!"

"It was a love-marriage, then! They were fairly wrapped up in each other, and that made what followed so much harder to bear!"

"An Eden—and a serpent!"

"That tells the story plainly enough! And yet—no: I'll tell you more, because, of course, *you* cannot read between lines, by sympathy which has not yet been wholly won."

"I was that married woman—*then*! And the serpent—I never liked, never wholly believed in him, even while he was at his best; but he was the closest friend my husband had, before marriage, and how could I blame him for wishing to keep up that friendship, after?"

"What was the critter's name, ma'am?" gravely asked Reuben Reeves.

"I'll tell you that, later on, if you wish when you have heard more. Please let me tell my story after my own fashion—'tis difficult enough at best, Heaven knows!"

"Shall I tell all that needs to be told, sister?" asked the tall sport, from his position against the wall.

"No!" with a complete resumption of her former cold composure. "I have never failed through womanly weakness, and I will not break my record now! So—this is my story, friends!"

"As I started out to say, all our trouble came through this false friend whom my poor husband trusted, because he himself was the very soul of honor, and could not imagine such vile treachery in one known and loved since childhood."

"Never mind the details," with a swift, covert glance toward Ethel, whose big black eyes were gazing half-dreamily into the fire. "Enough for now that I, time and time again, was forced to reject the evil advances of this human serpent; and then, the more deeply to sting *me*, he poisoned the mind and heart of my dear husband!"

"Say no more now, sister!" again urged the Silver Horn Sport. "Or, if the tale *must* be told, let *me* say the rest."

The Silver Queen made a repelling gesture, then spoke on:

"I'm not entering into details, because you would feel no particular interest in them, and time is passing too rapidly for the minutes to be so wasted. Now—listen!"

"That demon in human shape did his work only too well. He made my husband believe that white was black, and innocence foulest guilt! And then, after many vain

attempts on my part to clear away that awfully growing cloud, the nearly fatal blow fell: my dearly beloved husband applied for a divorce from me!

"For weeks and even months I was too utterly prostrated for aught else but to mourn my ruined home, my blasted life. But then—the case came to actual trial, and I—I lost!"

Madam Silver choked, her voice growing hardly articulate, finally breaking off altogether.

Fred Freestone shifted his position restlessly, an expression of stern anxiety showing upon his pale face.

Reuben Reeves stole a side glance into that masked face, his gaunt jaws working faster and faster upon his quid; while Ethel shyly slipped a little hand across until it touched that hand incased in woven metal.

Madam Silver quickly but tenderly clasped that little brown hand, and as though that sympathetic contact lent her renewed strength and nerve, she resumed the thread of her story.

"How I lived through those terrible days, I have never been able to comprehend since; but live through them I did, bearing up wonderfully, as I can realize now, until the court's decision was given—*against me!*"

"I only know that my husband was granted a decree, and that he was given full control of our one and only child. Then—something in my poor, overtasked brain seemed to give way, and I—oh, why couldn't the stroke have proved fatal to life, even as it had killed my heart, my soul, my hope on earth or in heaven?"

Ethel pressed that now trembling hand, and feeling that there was still direr need of sympathy, silently altered her position until she could lay warm cheek against that cold, silver-gloved hand.

It proved to be a most timely as well as delicately thoughtful action, and again strengthened just where and when she needed it most, the Silver Queen resumed her recital:

"I was borne forth from that hall of injustice, more dead than living, and that was the beginning of a long and dangerous illness. For weeks I was raving with brain fever, and then, when my bodily health began to improve, my tortured brain failed to keep pace with it; and—when I next came back to what may be called life, I was an inmate of an insane asylum!

"I had been an inmate for years—more than I dare even now to recall in thought—years which were as though I had never lived them, save as a deeper indictment against that demon who falsely swore away my husband, my child, my reason, my honor!

"It was yet a long time before I entirely regained my reason, for brooding over my terrible wrongs helped throw me back; but, at last, the day came round when I left that horrible prison behind me forever, and took up the burden of life again, for—*vengeance!*"

"Began life over again, in company with me, her younger brother," said Fred Freestone, gravely, thus definitely settling the relationship over which so large a portion of Chloride City had debated so curiously.

"And poor, disgraced, homeless, childless, husbandless woman never was blessed with a better, kinder, more faithful brother!" declared the Silver Queen, her tones softening as she shot a lovingly grateful look his way; but then her tones grew hard and metallic once more as she added:

"I lived only for vengeance upon the demon in human shape who had wrought all this bitter black wrong! I never knew anything like rest or waiting until I had ferreted him out, following up all his crooks and turns and serpent-like windings, as though he knew a Nemesis was camping on his trail, and that his sole chance for life lay in blinding his track so that vengeance could not catch up!"

"I reckon mebbe I mought give a fa'r guess at that dirty dog's own name, ma'am," slowly hinted the old hunter.

"He calls himself Ransom Eldridge, now," cut in the Silver Queen, "and my sole aim in life is to tear the cunning mask from his vile face and show him to all the world for the detestable villain he surely is!"

"You 'pear to know him tol'able well, but do you know all of him?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SILVER QUEEN UNMASKS.

THE old hunter asked this question, and there was deep meaning in his tones. There must have been something in his face, too, for the Silver Queen visibly shrunk away from him, though saying nothing, just then.

"Ef you *did* know all 'bout the dug-gun critter, ma'am, 'pears like mebbe you'd find it mighty sight harder work fer to sort out the right kind o' words to match *his* likeness—fer a naked fact, ma'am!"

"If you can tell us more than we know now," abruptly cut in Fred Freestone, "haven't we favored you enough to merit your confidence?"

"What can you tell about that demon? Anything—can you give me any tidings of my—oh, man!" with a sudden giving way of those false barriers, tearing off the mask which had held her face sacred from the gaze of all in Chloride City save her faithful brother, and for one brief period the maiden who was now watching and listening in wonder.

With strong interest Reuben Reeves gazed into that face by the dull reflection of the hearth-fire; but it was the face of a stranger to him, after all.

Madam Silver choked, and seemed unable to finish what she started to say. The old hunter had little difficulty in divining her full meaning, however, and slowly shook his head, silently blasting her dawning hopes.

"Tain't the likes o' *that* I meant, ma'am," he said, turning to gaze once more into the fire, his gaunt figure doubled up almost into a ball. "I've knowed a mighty heap o' men critters sence I was pupped, though, an' 'tain't fer me to say, in *too* big a hurry, that I didn't never meet up with the party you're thinkin' of. Later on, ef ye like, we kin sort o' match mem'ries, and see what we kin make of it. Fer now—thar's Ran. Eldridge!"

"I've knowed him this is a right smart chance, now! I've knowed him through my own findin' out, an' I've knowed of him 'long of what I've bin told by other men. An' so—waal, mebbe it'd pan out easier ef I was to foller *your* 'zample; sort o' make a reg'lar story-tellin' of it."

"The fu'st word I hed 'latin' to the critter all Chloride 'pears to reckon totes the sun in to his britches pocket, come my way through a man which I happened to help a bit, down near Denver, jest when the pore critter needed help, the wu'st sort."

"What man was that?" asked the Silver Queen. "What was his name?"

"Jim Van Buskirk," promptly answered the old hunter, and like one who had received another sore rebuff, Madam Silver drew back, head bowing once more.

"Tain't makin' no mighty dif'rence jest what sort o' help that was, es fur's I kin see," resumed the veteran. "Jim needed it. I was fixed so's I could give it. An' so—waal, thar's the hull tale!"

"Jim hed a powerful sight to tell me consarnin' this yere Ran. Eldridge, but I didn't make no much over it, *then*. Time was comin', though, when it's all come back to me, like a dream that mought 'a' bin born in childhood—so to speak!"

"That was after Jim had petered out. Died, jest 'cause he was tired of livin' any longer, 'peared like, too! Wasn't nothin' aildin' of him, fur's me or the doctor could find out. Jest didn't want to peg 'long any longer, so jest pegged out!"

Reuben Reeves heaved a loud sigh at this stage of his reminiscences, but neither of his companions spoke, and after a brief silence he added:

"Next time come later on. 'Twas still not fur out o' Denver, whar I was scrapin' up a fa'r to middlin' livin', pritty much like I be now; jest huntin' an' shootin' an' trap-pin' fer grub. Thar was jest us two: honey bird, hyar, an' the old man."

"Then, one day, while little gal 'nd me was up-crick fer trout, what comes of it but we ketched glimp' of a stranger critter, pritty nigh broken up in scraps, layin' on a side rock whar, ef he was to take 'nother start, he'd die afore he could half-way hit bottom!"

"Waal, 'twas a nasty lookout fer a man, let 'lone a snip of a gal, the way birdy was, then. Turned me sick to my in'ards, jest to

look, an' measure, an' think! But Ethel—waal, you jest *hush*, honey!" as the maiden made a deprecatory gesture. "Reckon I'm doin' this story-tellin', hain't I?"

"This man—you saved his life?" huskily asked the Silver Queen, that once banished hope returning to her great eyes.

"Birdy done it, ruther," promptly declared Reeves. "I'd 'a' bin too p'izen skeered o' killin' the pore critter through tryin' to do him good, to even try it on, 'thout *her* fer to punch me up. An' so—waal, we *did* manage to git what they was left o' him, thanks to birdy, an' a rope!"

"Once down whar it was sort o' on the level, it didn't cost so much fer to make a pack-mule out o' the old man, an' *that's* the way we toted the stranger down to our shack. An' *then*—waal, next thing was fer to fetch a doctor, an' that I done, while honey bird hyar, *she* tuck keer of that bunch o' broken bones!"

"Doc done his level best, an' patched the pore critter up so's he stuck it out fer pritty nigh two months. Ethel *she* done the nursin', mostly. Come sort o' nat'ral to *her*, seems 'sif, while me—I wasn't of 'nough 'count fer to be counted!"

"As if they'd believe that!" exclaimed Ethel, with a little gesture.

"That's all right, birdy, an' you jest keep on a-hushin'," retorted the hunter, but with a loving smile softening his rugged features. "An' so—when I tell yethis yer' all-broke-up stranger give us his name as David Ashmole, reckon *ye* kin begin to guess whar it was I begun fer to know more 'bout this yer' little god-a-mighty Chloride hes sot up on eend fer to bow down afore like dirty dog heathen Chinee!"

Both man and woman gave a start at this, but while interchanging quick and meaning glances, neither one ventured to speak.

"It's a solid fact, or I wouldn't be tellin' of it to ye," gravely asserted Reeves, reading their actions aright. "'Twas the David Ashmole that was once one o' the Silver League, an' when birdy, hyar, hed sort o' chirked him up ontel he could let his clapper run 'thout it doin' him too much hurt, he talked to us like we'd bin his best fri'nds fer more'n a thousan' years to look back on!"

"Then was when I fu'st got to know pritty much 'bout Chloride City an' sech things. An' then it was *he* told us why he'd levanted; beca'se he was too bad skeered to stay hyar longer!"

"An', when he got to know us right good an' strong, Dave told us why; said he'd skipped, fer fear ef he didn't, that the boss o' the Silver League'd croak him, jest es he'd done others!"

"Did Ashmole accuse Ransom Eldridge of murdering those other men?" almost breathlessly asked the Silver Queen. "Did he give you any *proof*, such as would stand good as evidence before the law?"

Old Reuben shook his head as he gravely answered:

"I'm afeared not, ma'am. I'd stake my neck onto it's bein' solid truth Dave Ashmole told, them days, but—I *couldn't* prove it in law!"

The Silver Queen gave a low groan, bowing her head. Fred Freestone moved to her side, an arm stealing around her bowed figure as he bent to whisper, consolingly:

"Patience, sister! The truth *must* prevail, in the end! We have waited long: we can wait yet longer, knowing that our time must surely come!"

"Then—pore Dave up 'n' died! But, afore that, he told us how much his sheer into the Climax Mine was wu'th, an' makin' me go fetch a lawyer-sharp up from Denver, he willed all he hed to Ethel, fer nussin' of him so thoughtful, a'ter savin' of his life in the fu'st place!"

"And you have kept your secret all this length of time?"

"That's what Dave done told me I'd better, ma'am," gravely. "He said Ran. Eldridge would 'a' murdered *him* fer his sheer into the Climax, ef he hedn't lit out so sudden thar wasn't no trackin' of him. An' he said best fix it all so's the lawyers could han'le matters fer birdy, an' never let the boss o' the Silver League know but what 'twas Dave, workin' the old lead under kiver."

"An' so 'twas done! An' then, to sort o' keep a eye onto the prop'ety, ye see, we

moved over this yer' way, an'—waal, *you* kin lump the rest, I reckon, easier'n I kin tell ye."

Silence reigned there in the lone cabin for the space of a minute. Evidently old Reuben considered he had said sufficient for that occasion, but not so the Silver Queen.

"Why is Ransom Eldridge trying so desperately to down you, Reeves?"

"I didn't—mebbe he hain't, then."

"You know that he is at the bottom of all this trouble," sharply insisted the Silver Queen; but shifting her point of attack abruptly, she asked:

"This girl: what was her mother's given name, Reuben Reeves?"

The old fellow gave a start and a shiver, but before he could speak or give Ethel a warning, the maiden answered:

"My mother's name was Victoria, daddy always told me, ma'am."

The Silver Queen caught her breath with a sharp gasp, one silver-clad hand flying to the region of her heart, the other going blindly out as though seeking support from her brother.

"Victoria—*my name!* And your father—you are not—*who is this girl,* Reuben Reeves?" her voice rising as her agitation deepened.

The old hunter caught Ethel in his arms, springing aside with her.

"The child o' Victoria an' Arthur Edmonds, *once*, but now—*my own little gal!*" he said, hoarsely, even defiantly as he clasped her closer.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT.

THE sun had not climbed very high above the hills which loomed up in the East, on the morning following the rescue of Reuben Reeves from his jail in Chloride City, when its yellow rays fell upon a plodding footman, making his way along the regular stage road, heading toward Chloride.

That footman was none other than Don Darling, the Dandy from Denver, but his appearance just now was far from befitting that title.

His garments showed signs of rough usage, soiled by dirt and stains from crushed grass or leaves, with here and there a rent which could hardly be termed either useful or ornamental.

Across one cheek was a long scratch, caused by hasty contact with a broken branch in darkness. His face, neck and hands were streaked with dust and perspiration.

Taken all in all, Don Darling bore very little resemblance to the elegantly attired personage who had ridden into Chloride City on the box-seat, that evening only one week before!

And yet, that was a face not entirely gone to the bad. There was a gleam of almost fierce triumph visible in those big brown eyes, and while he moved like one pretty well exhausted by hard travel, the Denver Detective certainly did not look just like one who has lost an important game.

"Tough lines, but—*git thar Eli!*" Darling said, as a bruise on his foot caused him to limp anew. "You've got to get there, man! It's time for the grand round-up!"

With many a glance backward, as though he feared to be overtaken by some one who might see fit to interfere with the plans he had shaped, the Denver Detective hurried along, sore, hungry, thirsty, yet proving himself a man of pure grit by persevering in the face of so many difficulties.

When at the point along the road from whence his first fair glimpse of Chloride City could be won, Don Darling eagerly strained his eyes to drink in all that might be visible. And at first sight, he muttered:

"I knew it!"

Right where his keen sense of locality told him the vacated building selected as the temporary prison for Reuben Reeves ought to stand, there was now a thin, blue haze, rising from still hot embers!

"They burned it down, but— How did they get the guard away long enough to run the old man out?"

That was the question which puzzled the detective, now, but it did not last long. As he came more fairly into sight of the town, he saw where, near the western edge of Chloride, another fire had been raging; then the mystery seemed fairly solved.

Near both patches of ruins, Don Darling could see men and women and children standing, no doubt busily engaged in discussing the exciting events of the night; but without losing any time in trying to imagine aught of these, the Denver Detective hurried along the stage road, eager to reach the scene where the final act of the Silver League drama must be played to its ending.

Still, it was his nearest course, and feeling that he was well within reach of his game in case sudden action should be demanded, Darling stopped at the first ruin, to pick up what information he might.

This was where Reuben Reeves had been confined before his rescue, and without calling too close attention to himself, through asking many questions, Darling was not long in picking up all the points he deemed essential.

It appeared that, when an alarm of fire was started, the guard forgot all about the duty which had been intrusted them, and ran with all the rest of town to the scene of danger.

For danger it was: the worst peril that can menace a hastily-built town like Chloride City, where each house is a veritable tinder-box.

And then—well, the discovery of that rescue came more speedily than the bold rescuers had calculated upon, or, in fact, intended.

The jail was afire. All now in Chloride City supposed the outlaws who had set the murderer free, had likewise fired this building, but later on, Don Darling knew different. *This* fire had come about through pure accident, in all probability from a bursting or overturned oil lamp.

Having picked up this much information, Don Darling passed on toward the house of Eldridge; but before he could win fairly in sight of that cozy little cottage, another source of wild excitement sprung up.

Shouts and cries came to the ears of the Denver Detective, and as the alarm was from right ahead, he hurried his steps, and then—he recognized Dick Lane, the mayor's factotum, bare-headed and wild-eyed, his long arms flourishing crazily as he floundered along toward the center of town, his voice lifted in hardly articulate speech.

A number of citizens had already caught that alarm, and were hurrying toward the cottage, but Darling intercepted Lane, giving him a stern grip and a vigorous shake by way of arranging his scattered wits.

"What is it? What has happened, you idiot?" the detective sharply demanded, now that he had won notice for himself. "Your master—where is Mr. Eldridge?"

"Back there!" panted the terrified servant, with a jerk of his head in the direction of the house. "All—fighting—oh, Lord!"

Gripping him with both hands, Don Darling turned Dick Lane to the right-about, forcing him along in the desired direction, at the same time ordering him to tell his story in a single breath.

The poor fellow was far too greatly upset in mind to do just that, yet the masterful manner of the Denver Detective was not wholly lost upon him, and by eking out those broken, disconnected sentences, something like this was brought to light.

Dick Lane heard the sound of voices coming from the room which was used by Mayor Eldridge as his home-office, and fancying that he was called to perform some needed service, he hastened thither, only to find the door closed and locked.

Then he heard those voices again, and despite his partial deafness, he knew that his master was quarreling fiercely with another person. And looking in at the keyhole, Dick Lane saw—

"Master shooting at somebody! And he looked like a very devil, so he did! And then—I just *had* to skin out—and I *skun!*"

By this time Don was close to the cottage front, where a number of citizens had gathered, all seeming afraid to venture into the house, until he set them an example, sternly crying out:

"This way, men! Ready for hot work, if it must come! But—take whoever resists, alive! Mind; no killing, no harming—*take alive!*"

The front door was still open, just as it had been left by Dick Lane in his hasty flight, and springing across the threshold in

the lead of all, Don Darling came to the closed door, which failed to open at his twisting touch on the knob.

"Open, in there!" he called out, sternly.

"Open, or—"

He broke off abruptly, for a sound came to his ears, in spite of his own speech and the noise made by the feet of his allies. He listened for a repetition, and that came after a few seconds: husky, uncertain, but the words easy of comprehension.

"Force the door! I can't—bu'st it open, man!"

"Give me room!" Don Darling commanded, voice backed up by squaring arms and sharp elbows.

One vigorous plunge, and the lock gave way, the door flying open, and the Denver Detective staggering almost on top of—heavens!

"Back!" called forth a husky yet fierce voice, and although the curtain was drawn before the window, there was light enough to show them all the reclining shape of a man, literally soaked with blood, yet strong enough to menace them with a cocked revolver. "*He's my meat!* Don't dare to touch him until—*back, or I shoot to kill!*"

That bloodstained shape was Jerome Felton, and just beyond, lying on the floor, bound and gagged, an ugly cut showing across his partly bald crown, was Ransom Eldridge, Mayor of Chloride City!

Swift as thought Don Darling disarmed Felton, turning the gun upon the citizens who stood amazed, sternly crying as he pointed to Eldridge:

"Stand back, one and all! I'm in charge here, and I'll kill the first man who even tries to chip in!"

"What can you mean, man alive?" demanded David Wilkinson sternly.

"That these are my prisoners, and *that Ransom Eldridge is the Secret Slayer!*"

CHAPTER XXXI.

SOLVING THE DEATH RIDDLE.

THAT bound and gagged form gave an awkward flounder at this stern accusation, but with another revolver to back himself up, Don Darling moved nearer the Mayor of Chloride City, and plainly assumed charge of the situation.

With the authority of the law back of him, he might possibly have held possession without very serious trouble, but as he recognized David Wilkinson, and one or two others of the citizens' committee, who he felt fairly well assured were honest, trustworthy men, he promptly called on them to lend him aid, as a *posse*.

From the instant of his being so dexterously disarmed, Jerome Felton had lain there in his own blood, showing nothing save a fierce pleasure in the course taken by the Denver Detective.

If guilt was attached to himself, as seemed highly probable, the swart member of the Silver League evidently knew that he had received his "last sickness," and could come to no worse harm.

Although half-stupefied by that totally unexpected charge against the man whom all Chloride held in such high esteem, Wilkinson and his friends showed a desire to comply with the wishes of the detective, and seeing that he would have solid force to back up his word, Don Darling ordered the room cleared of all outsiders, and the house itself placed under guard.

This was immediately done, and after the Dandy from Denver had spoken a few words to Wilkinson, making that worthy comprehend more clearly what damning proof he had secured against Ransom Eldridge, the merchant showed himself the very best of cordjutors.

And so, in less than ten minutes after bursting open that door, Don Darling was placed in full possession, with the excited public excluded from the cottage, and armed guards vigilantly alert, all taking the cue from David Wilkinson.

Inside, Eldridge had been lifted to an armchair, where he was bound fast for the time being.

Felton was removed from the blood-stained floor to a bed in the adjoining chamber, and there Dr. Brewster was once again called upon to examine and report as to the condition of a member of the Silver League.

This time his patient was living, but that was pretty much all that could be said in his favor.

His broad chest was fairly riddled by bullets, and seemed one mask of gore. And, without going so far as to probe any one of the hurts, the doctor gravely reported that death was but a question of time.

"He may live until night, but I seriously doubt it. He may die inside of half an hour. I place the end somewhere between those two extremes."

"Will talking make any serious difference to him, doctor?" soberly asked the Denver Detective.

"Not unless he gives way to too strong excitement," came the slow reply. "And—if there's aught of vital importance to be learned—"

"There surely is, sir!"

"Then the quicker you set about it, Mr. Darling, the better!"

And so it was that, after the physician had done all that lay in his power as such, for the terribly wounded man, Don Darling, David Wilkinson and two other prominent citizens of Chloride City, stood near the bed on which Felton lay, listening to his low, almost whispered sentences, the most of which were aimed against the man who had for so long been a sort of popular idol in Chloride City.

Begging that his words might be taken down, and declaring that he spoke with full knowledge that he was about to die, Jerome Felton fully cleared up the mystery of the Silver League.

He swore that the Climax Mine had been won in the first place by cruel murder; that the lode had been discovered by two prospectors, both utter strangers to the men who afterward formed the Silver League; that those poor fellows had been murdered by Ransom Eldridge and himself, after forcing an alliance with them, where all were to share and share alike in the great discovery.

Eldridge formed the plot, and gave Felton the poison to put in the coffee. And then—the end was much as the mayor had told Don Darling shortly after the detective reached Chloride City.

Only they two had any guilty knowledge of that initial crime, but doubtless David Ashmole discovered or suspected the awful truth, later on, and so sought his own safety in flight.

Jerome Felton told how Eldridge, while on a business trip to New York, procured a couple of shirts of mail, which were guaranteed to turn a bullet, or to foil the most vicious knife-stroke. And with each so guarded, their later career of crime was begun.

Ransom Eldridge shot Owen Yarwood, making use of a rifle-cane which he had made to order while on East, and with which he used shells loaded with a recently invented nitro powder, which gave a very slight report, hardly any smoke, yet was of wonderful strength.

Felton admitted killing the "Wild Irishman," Michael Mahoney, using his own favorite weapon, the knife, just as he did later on, in the case of Neil Vance.

Pike Hunter was slain by Eldridge, who stood at the edge of the Silver Horn, and using his rifle-cane, which he could by a simple twist and a hidden joint, turn from weapon into harmless support.

When the terrible confession reached this point, a sinking spell came over the wounded sinner, and for a time it was believed he had spoken his last words; but Dr. Brewster, with Don Darling as assistant, did such good work that Jerome Felton gradually rallied, and was able to finish his confession before weakness of advancing death returned.

"Yes, I killed him!" he said, in answer to a question by Darling. "I killed him because he was trying to win Ethel Reeves, and I swore she should be no man's wife unless she was mine. And then—I killed him!"

This, too, was a deed fully agreed upon by those arch-schemers, and knowing that the deed was to be done that very night, Ransom Eldridge, to ward off all possible suspicion from himself in the mind of the Denver Detective, set forth upon that "duty tour," thus making sure of a perfect alibi.

When asked why he accused Reuben Reeves, Felton was no less frank.

"To get him out of the way, and so leave me a clear field for winning Ethel. Then, too, Eldridge reasoned that *your* eyes would he still further filled with dust, and while you barked along a false trail, we could work our will with the rest of the League."

It was a hideous confession, for Felton showed no signs of shame or of remorse, more than once laughing faintly at the complete success of their diabolical schemes.

When questioned as to how the fatal quarrel arose between the mayor and himself, he declared that, on meeting after their vain search for the rescued prisoner, he had accused Eldridge of spiriting away Ethel Reeves for his own evil purposes. That brought on the quarrel, and with his rifle-cane, catching Felton off guard, the other began shooting, to kill.

"But I downed the devil!" with vicious triumph in voice and eyes. "And now—swear me again! Make it good and hard! Don't leave a single loophole for him to crawl out of! *Hang him*—make him die the death of a dog—and even that would be all too good for him!"

Only once again did Felton speak aloud, and then to faintly utter:

"I'm dying—boots on! But Eldridge—hang—hang—hang!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE END AT LAST.

RANSOM ELDRIDGE was not seriously hurt during his fight with Jerome Felton, but after trying to laugh that death-bed confession to scorn, and vowing indignantly that it was all the vile scheme of a still more evil enemy to avenge his richly merited death, a change came over him.

One by one the links in a terribly strong chain of evidence were welded together, and as he saw that the guilt was impossible to hide, he who had for so long reigned almost supreme in Chloride City, broke down and proved a cur of the most pitiful description.

He was confronted with the rifle-cane still containing three of the nitro-powder cartridges, with their bullets of special caliber, just as he had too carefully proven for the still more complete blinding of the Dandy from Denver.

Then the story told by David Ashmole was produced, through Reuben Reeves, duly written out, signed and sworn to. That explained how Ashmole happened to overhear a talk between Eldridge and Felton, in the course of which the villains decided to make Ashmole their next victim.

Then still other points were brought forward by Don Darling, which he had gathered together since his arrival in Chloride City, but many of which he had been unable to comprehend until after he dogged Reuben Reeves and his bold rescuers to that deserted cabin, there crouching at a crevice in the rear of the hut through all of their talk, only a portion of which is recorded, as yet.

And then, when confronted by the Silver Queen, or Victoria Edmonds, the woman whose life he had blasted so many years ago, and who now told him how closely she had followed his sinful career in Chloride City, and how surely she could convict him of murder, his nerve gave way, and he begged for mercy as a whelp whines beneath the merited lash!

His greatest fear seemed to be of mob-law, and when Don Darling promised to sacredly protect him against that punishment, Ransom Eldridge made full confession pretty much along the lines marked out by Jerome Felton, his confederate.

He went further, in one respect, since he admitted their firm resolve to kill Don Darling in case he seemed to be hitting off the right scent!

Among other things, he explained the supposed shot of that first night, and showed how the peculiar sound as of lead striking his shirt of mail had been produced: a stout rubber band, fixed to strike his pocket-book when pulled out, then smartly released!

The suit of clothes, also, had been prepared in advance, by shooting through them as they hung upon a dummy: the same on which his shirt of mail had been stretched, to receive those three shots.

When confronted by the Silver Queen, and

she lifted her mask, Ransom Eldridge—to continue the name under which alone Chloride City knew him—almost immediately recognized the woman he had so bitterly wronged in days gone by.

Then, thoroughly cowed and broken in nerve, he admitted all, and swore that his testimony through which Arthur Edmonds divorced the wife he had loved so passionately, was false and suborned.

Later on, that same night, Eldridge admitted that it was his intention to kill off, or to scare into selling out, the rest of those who held stock in the Climax Mine, and when only himself and Jerome Felton were left, to finally dispose of the latter, then to sell the mine, and cross the Atlantic to live a life of sybaritic luxury!

Instead—when the sun rose again, it found Chloride City without a mayor.

Suicide seemed an impossibility, for Don Darling and David Wilkinson kept wakeful watch and ward over the vicious villain all night. But the fact remained: Ransom Eldridge was dead, and poison had ended his earthly career, even as poison had been the beginning of that ill-omened Silver League!

When peace was once more restored, and Reuben Reeves knew that the woman who had passed in Chloride City as the Silver Queen, had been fully exonerated by the man who first blasted her reputation in the eyes of the world, he frankly admitted that Ethel was not his own child, but the daughter of Arthur Edmonds, whom he had misnamed Jim Van Buskirk when questioned as to his friend Madam Silver.

His friendship won through an important service, Edmonds, when death came to end an embittered life, gave Ethel in trust to the old hunter, swearing him to bring the child up in complete ignorance of her real parentage. And as the surest method of doing that, Reeves called her his own daughter.

Ethel and her mother soon grew to be friends, and when the Silver Horn was disposed of, brother and sister severed all connection with a "sporting life."

Why not, when their chief end in life was fairly won? The past made clear, her reputation restored so far as complete confession of the only sinner could make it, the criminal dead, her child recovered!

Before leaving Chloride City for all time, the building in which Reuben Reeves had been confined, was paid for. The other fire had consumed vacant buildings which belonged to the pards of the Silver Horn, so no "kick was coming" to the citizens on that score!

And Don Darling?

The mystery of the Silver League and the Secret Slayer was fully solved, even if he had no prisoner to show for his work; and, it is a matter of record that, something less than one year from the day when the "Dandy from Denver" entered Chloride City, a certain ceremony was performed which gave Ethel Reeves-Edmonds yet another name: that of Mrs. Don Darling!

Reuben Reeves is still alive, and lives with "his children," but Mrs. Edmonds—the Silver Queen—did not live to see the birth of her first grandchild.

With her fair fame restored, and her arch enemy sent to a merited doom, her object in life seemed at an end. And, by her own dying request, she was buried by the side of her once husband, almost in the shadow of Pike's Peak.

THE END.

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